NEW

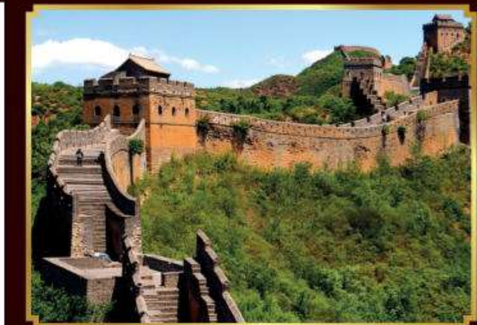
# STORY OF THE SILK ROAD

Discover how the secret of silk changed the world forever

EXPLORE THE ROUTE CONNECTING THE ANCIENT EAST AND WEST

Digital Edition

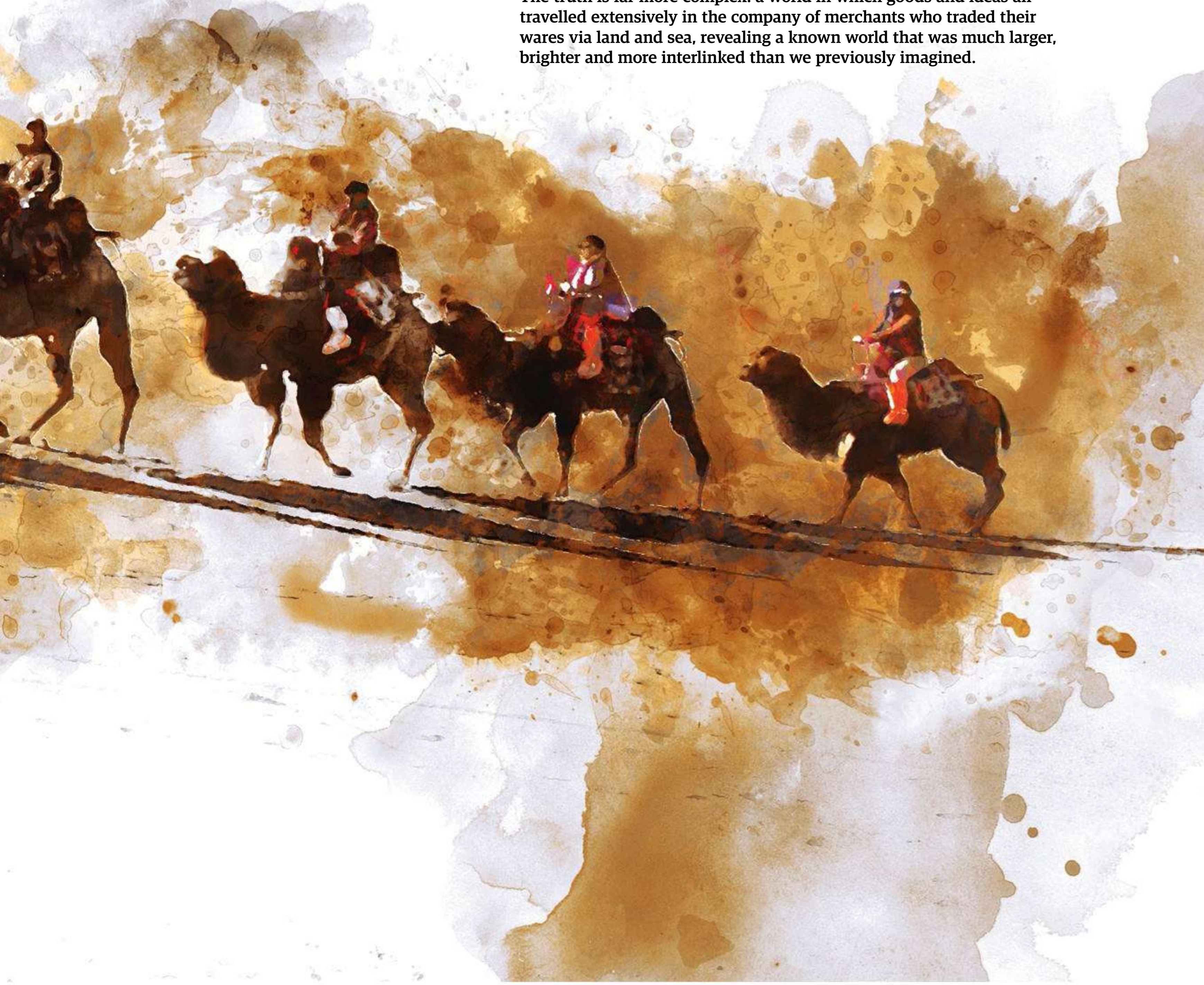
FOURTH EDITION



GREAT EMPIRES • LOST CITIES • CONFLICT & CONQUEST

# Welcome to STORY OF THE SILK ROAD

For centuries, the Silk Road has been a byword for the exoticised East (or West, depending on your perspective). But what really went on along this network of trade routes that linked Europe with Asia, and what can it reveal about the interconnectedness of the realms of the ancient and medieval eras? We often assume that during these periods of history, nations kept themselves to themselves, with only a few empires striking out into unknown territories to extend the boundaries of the known world. The truth is far more complex: a world in which goods and ideas all travelled extensively in the company of merchants who traded their wares via land and sea, revealing a known world that was much larger, brighter and more interlinked than we previously imagined.



# STORY OF THE SILK ROAD

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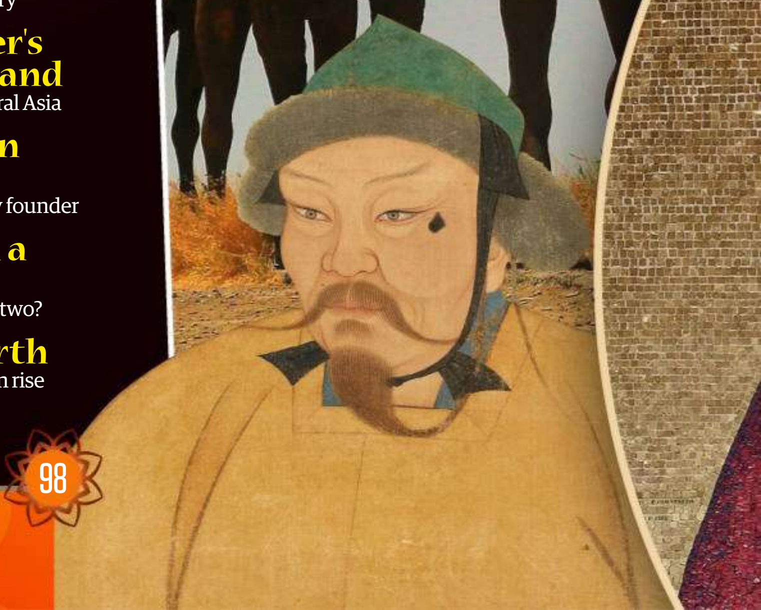

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# The story of silk

*Silk may be the product of a humble moth larva but it has had a powerful influence on the history of the world*

Written by Ben Gazur

**Silk was, as the name suggests, at the heart of trade along the Silk Roads. When silk arrived in the West it came to nations that had no idea of its true origin or the country it came from. All people knew was that they wanted this gorgeously smooth, light, and strong material - and they were willing to pay high prices for it. Even today it is a costly fabric but in past centuries fortunes were spent on it and other luxuries from the East. Pliny the Elder calculated the cost of gems and fabrics to Rome in the first century CE. "At the lowest computation India and Seres [China]... drain our empire of one hundred million sesterces every year."**

What was it that drove people to desire and import silk across such vast distances?

## THE MYTH OF SILK

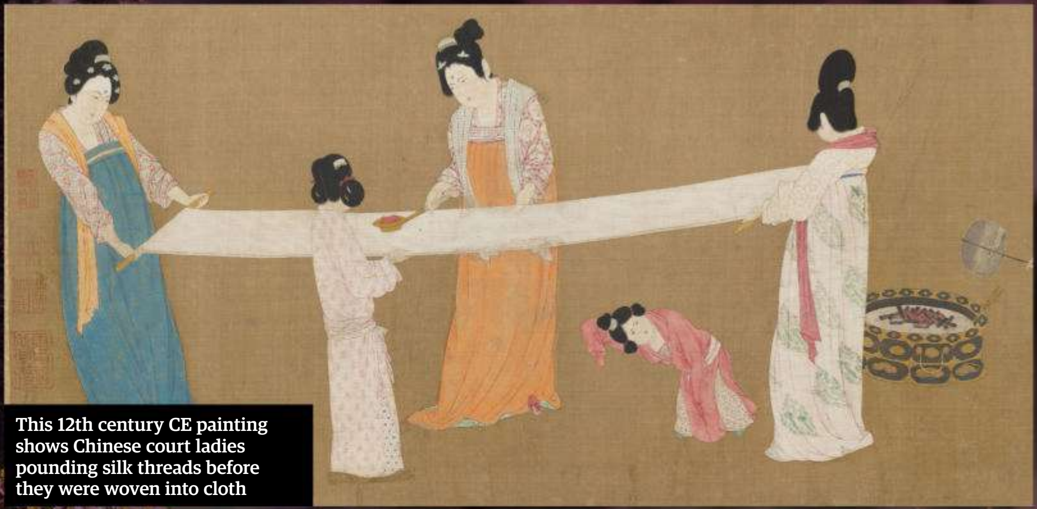
According to Chinese legend there was once a ruler known as the Yellow Emperor, Xuanyuan, who brought many of the wonders of civilisation to the Chinese people. His rule is usually dated to around 2600 BCE. It was during his reign that silk is first said to have been discovered.

The emperor's wife, Lady Leizu, was one day enjoying a bowl of hot tea while seated beneath a mulberry bush. Unfortunately for the lady's tea something fell from the branches of the tree and landed directly in her bowl. As Leizu fished to retrieve it she plucked out a single fine strand and began to pull. No matter how much she retrieved there always seemed to be more. Soon the entirety of her garden was covered in the gossamer threads. Puzzled by what it could be she looked around and saw cocoons of the silkworm were hanging in the tree above.

Being an experimentalist Leizu dipped one of the cocoons into her boiling tea and found that it soon began to unravel. By wrapping the silk around her finger she was able to collect the strands. Understanding how useful this natural fibre could be she planted a grove of mulberry trees so that she could breed silkworms. Along with other discoveries Leizu is credited with inventing reels that joined individual threads together into threads and then the looms that were used to weave those threads into a fabric.

Leizu is therefore considered the inventor of sericulture - silk farming. Today Leizu is worshipped as the Goddess of Silk and a festival in honour of her is held in the Chinese city of Huzhou. In the past, the fourth month of the lunar calendar was called the 'silkworm month' as this was the start of the new silkworm season.

While the tale of Leizu may be debatable as to its historical accuracy it does speak to the high regard of silk and the importance it was to play in the Chinese economy. Other folk stories from China and Vietnam acknowledge the sacrifice of the silkworms in giving up their cocoons. In some, the silkworms are actually maidens that have been transformed into the insects and the beautiful cocoons they weave are memories of their past lives. In Japan, often the tragic girl, and it is always a girl, was set adrift by a wicked stepmother in a boat made of mulberry wood. When she washed up on the shores of Japan she was nursed by a local man but died anyway and her soul became a silkworm. It was from her then that Japan gained its silk and indeed this divinely inspired fabric was about to spread across the world.



This 12th century CE painting shows Chinese court ladies pounding silk threads before they were woven into cloth

Silk, painstakingly woven from miles of thread, became one of the major economic pillars of the Chinese economy

Image source: Getty

## DISCOVERY OF SILK

The true origins of silk fabric will likely never be known. The best that can be done is to search the archaeological record for its earliest traces. A silkworm cocoon was discovered at a site in China dating to ~5,000-3,000 BCE. Those who found it thought that the cocoon that had been cut open deliberately. This seems unlikely to have been done if the cocoon was to be used to produce silk as cutting the cocoon reduces the length of the silk fibres. Silkworm larvae have been, and still are in several countries, eaten so it may be that this example was used for food rather than fashion.

The oldest examples of silk fabric that still exist were discovered in Qianshanyang dating from ~2,700 BCE. These fragments of threads and ribbons show how threads of silk were woven at an early stage. Discoveries of artefacts used in spinning and weaving also point to an early development of silk fabrics.

One of the problems of natural fibres is that they are often unstable over long periods of time. Though silk is a relatively strong fabric it can be broken down by extreme conditions or biological activity by bacteria, moulds, and insects. One group of researchers however examined soil from tombs dating to ~5,500 BCE. In their samples fragments of the building blocks of silk were found and may push back by several millennia the use of silk in clothing.

Outside of archaeology our best evidence of the use of silk in antiquity are the written records that survive. By the Shang dynasty (~1,600-1,000 BCE) writing was developed in China. Examples of their texts survive on oracle bones used to learn about the future or ask the gods for guidance. Engraved on these bones are the first textual evidence of silk production. Silkworms, mulberry trees, and silk fabric are all explicitly named showing that sericulture was already very well established at this point.

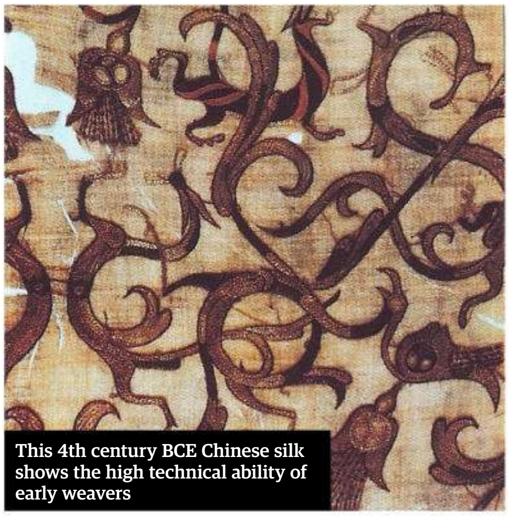
## PRODUCTION OF SILK

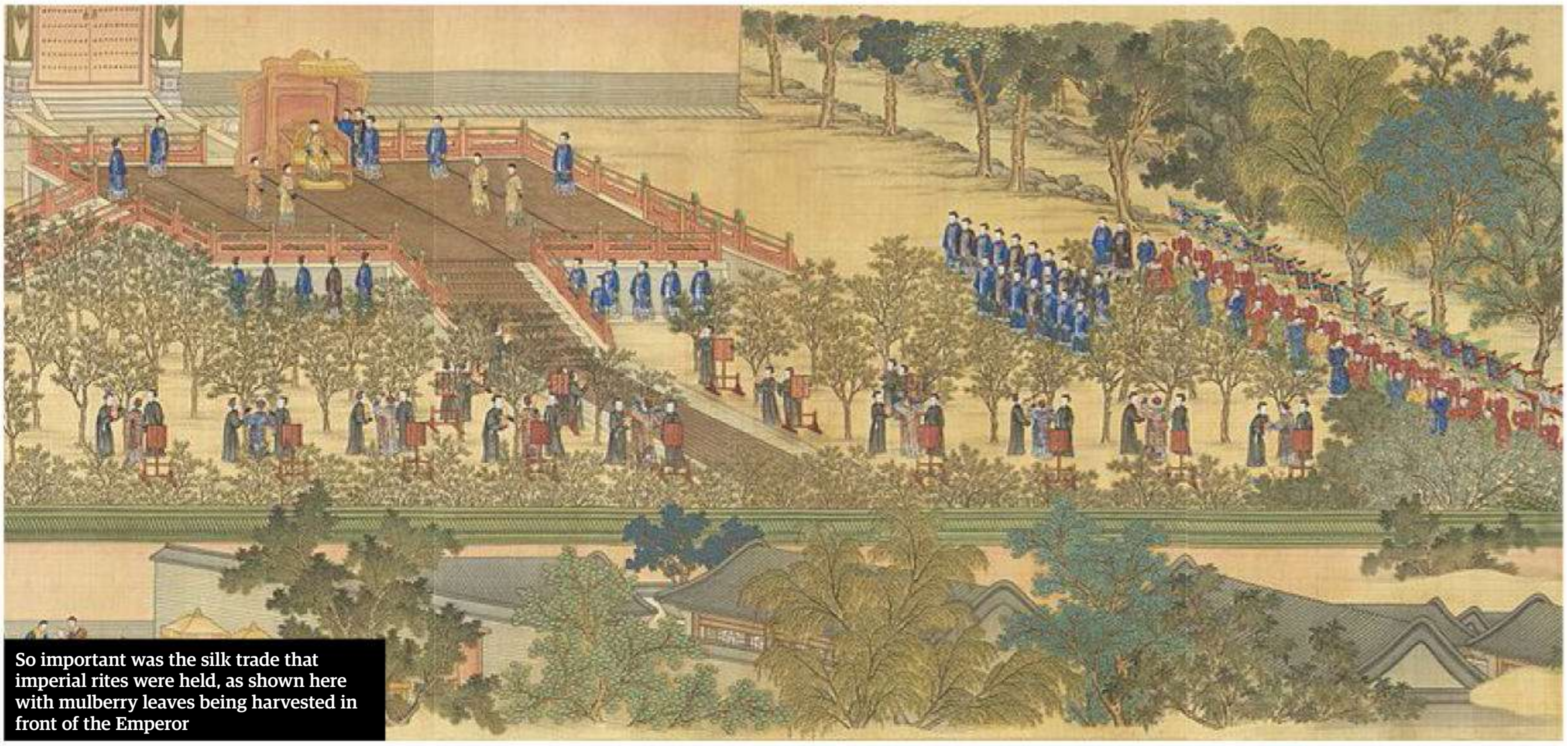
Producing silk is a labour intensive process, and not just for the silkworms. Like many insects silkworms go through a metamorphosis that sees their bodies break down and rearrange themselves into their adult form. To do this they must create a protective cocoon for the change to occur within. It is this cocoon that is the source of silk.

It takes a silkworm around three days to spin its cocoon around itself. In all it creates a single thread that can be over 1000m long, even though it is a mere 0.025mm in width. They produce this silk from glands in their mouth that they use to weave the silk around themselves. Once the cocoon is spun silk producers have no more use for the silkworm. The silkworms must be killed before they moult because if they are allowed to live they produce enzymes that weaken the silk to allow them to escape the cocoon. As the moth that develops from the pupa emerges it also cuts through the silk. This severely reduces the length of the silk threads available and makes the silk produced less useful in making fabric.

To harvest the silk, just as the tale of Leizu suggests, the cocoons are placed in hot water. This allows the strands of silk to be teased apart. Silk is made from a protein called fibroin and a sticky substance called sericin. Washing out the sericin, or degumming the thread, may have been one of the prized techniques that the Chinese did not share with outsiders. Sericin is useful however in the early steps of producing thread as it glues individual strands of silk together. Usually 30 to 50 cocoons are plunged in at the same time and workers gather a single strand from each one. These are joined together to make a single thread of silk thick enough that it can be worked with. Because each thread is so light and difficult to work with it is often weighed down with sand as it is gathered together.

Cultivating silkworms is a tricky business. Silkworms today have been so thoroughly bred by humans for use in sericulture that they cannot survive without our intervention. The adults of domesticated silkworms are no longer able to fly. They have been artificially selected to allow silkworms to live in crowded conditions, grow faster, and produce more silk. Silk produced in the earliest days of sericulture would have been even more highly prized than it is today. Mulberry trees are cultivated so that their branches hang low


This 4th century BCE Chinese silk shows the high technical ability of early weavers


So important was the silk trade that imperial rites were held, as shown here with mulberry leaves being harvested in front of the Emperor

## Silk in ancient Rome

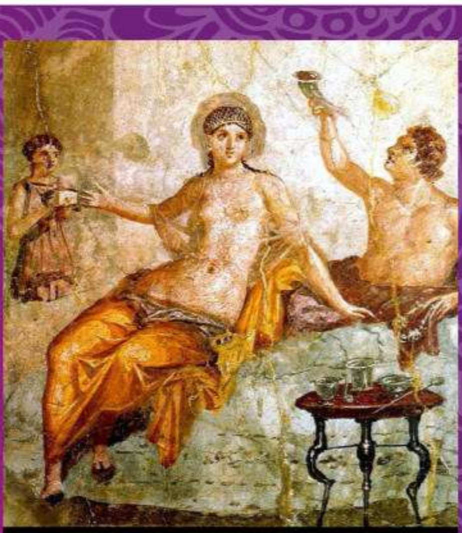
**The Romans knew of two types of silk. The sericum they speak of came from a land to the far east they knew as Serica – China**

This silk with which we are familiar was a costly version of one that they also had. Known as 'coa vestis' or 'fabric from Kos' it was a silk spun from insect cocoons in just the way Chinese silk was.

Made from the cocoons of the moth Pachypasa otus this material was prized by the Romans for its transparency. Pliny the Elder credits the discovery of coa vestis to a lady called Pamphile on the island. Pliny also hailed dresses made from the fabric because "while they cover a woman, at the same moment [they] reveal her naked charms." The daringly revealing nature of coa vestis led to it being associated with prostitutes and others of loose morals.

Pliny, who found it so charming on a lady, lamented its use by men. "Nor, in fact, have the men even felt ashamed to make use of garments formed of this material, in consequence of their extreme lightness in summer: for, so greatly have manners degenerated in our day."

Later Romans however sought the richer silks of China, regardless of the cost. The Emperor Heliogabalus is said to have been the first person to wear clothes entirely made from silk.

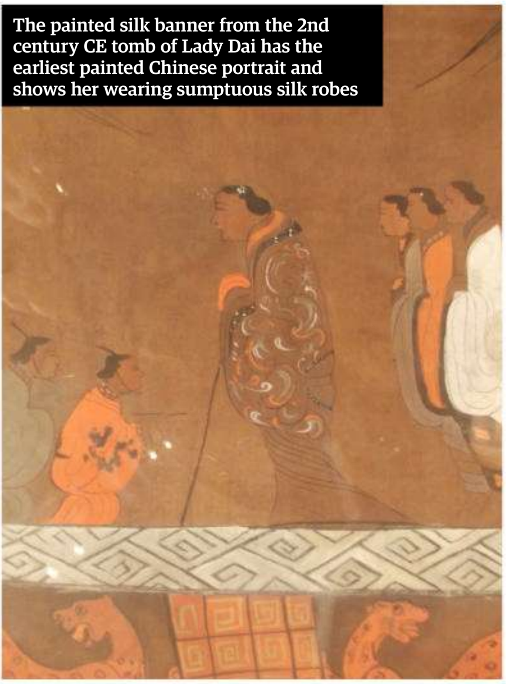


Silk clothing may have been prized by the Romans but it was also linked to degeneracy and low morals

to allow silk workers to harvest the leaves more easily. While silkworms are able to eat leaves from several other species those worms that feed on white mulberry exclusively will produce a silk of exceptional whiteness and increased strength.

### SILK IN SOCIETY

Silk is not valued simply because it is rare however. To feel silk against your skin is to feel luxury. The fabrics made from silk have a lustrous shine and a wonderfully soft texture. Silk strands are strong, which allows them to be woven into a very fine material. The thinness of silk made it perfect for hot temperatures where single layers allowed the skin to breath. It could also be used to make warmer clothes by padding it. Even 'silk fluff'– the leftover product of making silk – was valued for stuffing clothes to make them warmer.



The painted silk banner from the 2nd century CE tomb of Lady Dai has the earliest painted Chinese portrait and shows her wearing sumptuous silk robes

Image source: Wiki;Flazaza

Sei Shonagon, writing in Japan around the year 1000 CE, described the effects of silk clothing as worn by one high ranking man. He "walked in, dressed in a Chinese-style cloak of lavender silk gauze, with lavender brocade gathered trousers over deep maroon under-trousers, and a shift of brilliant stiff white silk beneath the cloak. Now you'd imagine that in the midst of that assembly of light, cool clothing these clothes would produce a sense of stifling heat, but in fact he looked absolutely splendid."

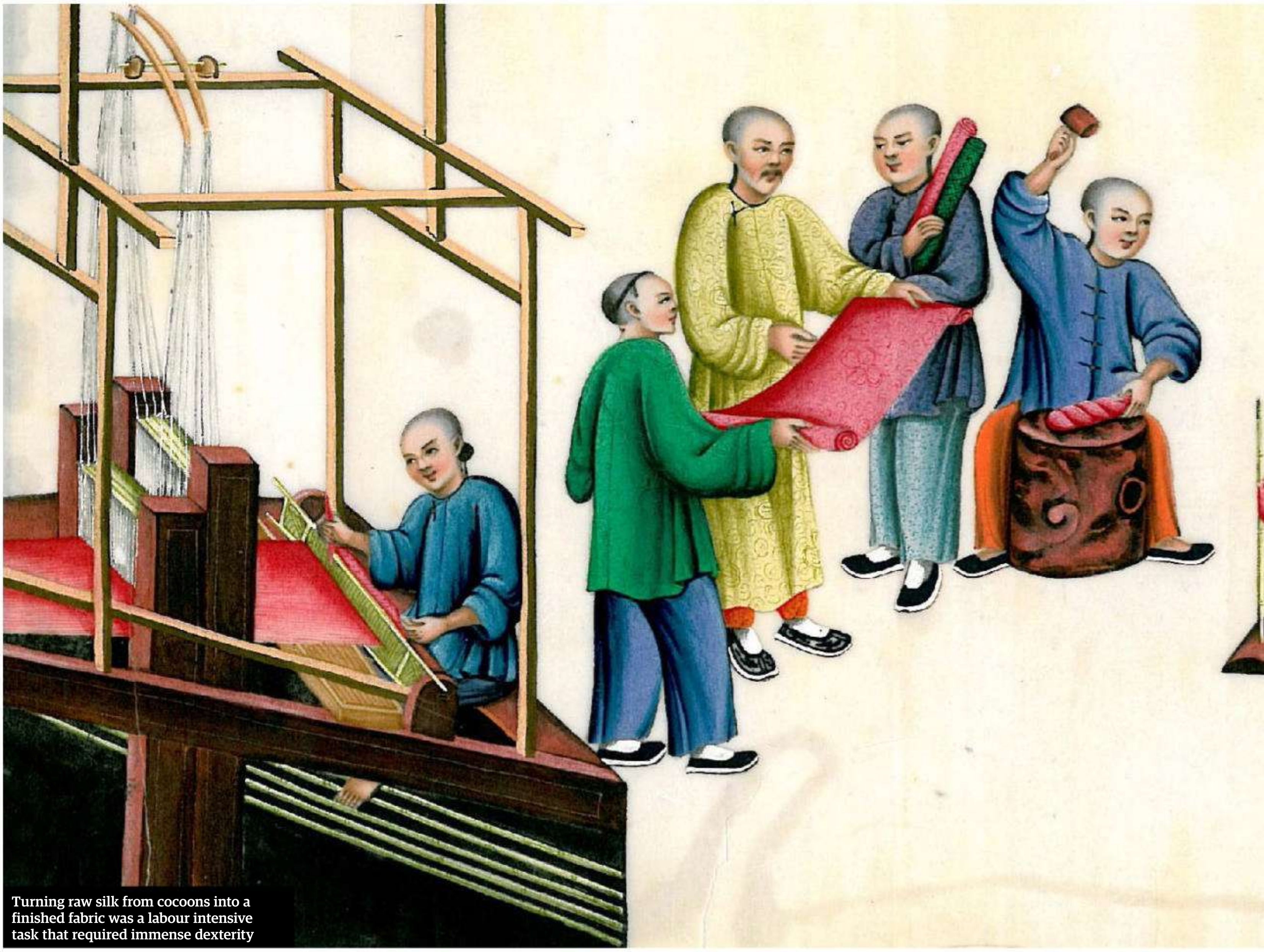
It was the almost impossibly thin nature of silk that most surprised those only used to coarser fabrics like wool and cotton. One report from the Tang dynasty has an Arab merchant meeting a Chinese official and noticing a mole on his chest. The merchant continued to stare down until the official asked what was wrong. Commenting on the mole the merchant was astounded to be told that he was seeing it through two layers of cloth. Amazed by the properties of silk the merchant immediately went into the silk business. Silk also was valuable because it could be dyed in many colours. At first the colour of silk was decided by the food on which the silkworms were fed. White mulberry causes the worms to make white silk while yellow silk is made by silkworms fed on wild mulberry. To add artificial colours the silk was first bleached and then anything from fruit juice to root extracts to mineral dyes were used to stain the fabric the desired hue. Silk cloth could either be printed on to make patterns or complex designs could be woven directly into the fabric by skilled workers on looms.

Painted silks were another fabric favoured by the elite. In the tomb of Xin Zhui, known as the Lady of Dai, dating from the 2nd century BCE a painted silk banner has been recovered still with its imagery intact. The banner shows a portrait of Xin Zhui, the earliest painted portrait from China, and the heavenly realm above and the underworld beneath. Also found at Mawangdui nearby were religious and other texts from the same period painted directly onto silk.

Sumptuary laws from the Han dynasty attempted to limit silk, particularly patterned silks, to clothing for members of the upper classes. The sumptuary laws were designed to allow the different classes in China to be easily identified. The laws also show that this failed and that merchants and others with enough money but not the right breeding were always trying to wear more and more extravagant fabrics.

> *"As silk had a high value and could be easily transported it often was used as a substitute for money"*

Silk soon became one of the mainstays of Chinese fabric manufacture. The courts of local rulers sometimes had studios attached to them who made silk exclusively for important officials. As silk had a high value and could be easily transported it often was used as a substitute for money. It was often accepted as tax and under the Zu Yong Daio taxation system of the Tang dynasty every taxed adult had to provide two bolts of silk.



Turning raw silk from cocoons into a finished fabric was a labour intensive task that required immense dexterity

While silk changed the way the Chinese dressed and conducted business perhaps its greatest effect was in China's dealing with the outside world.

## THE SILK TRADE

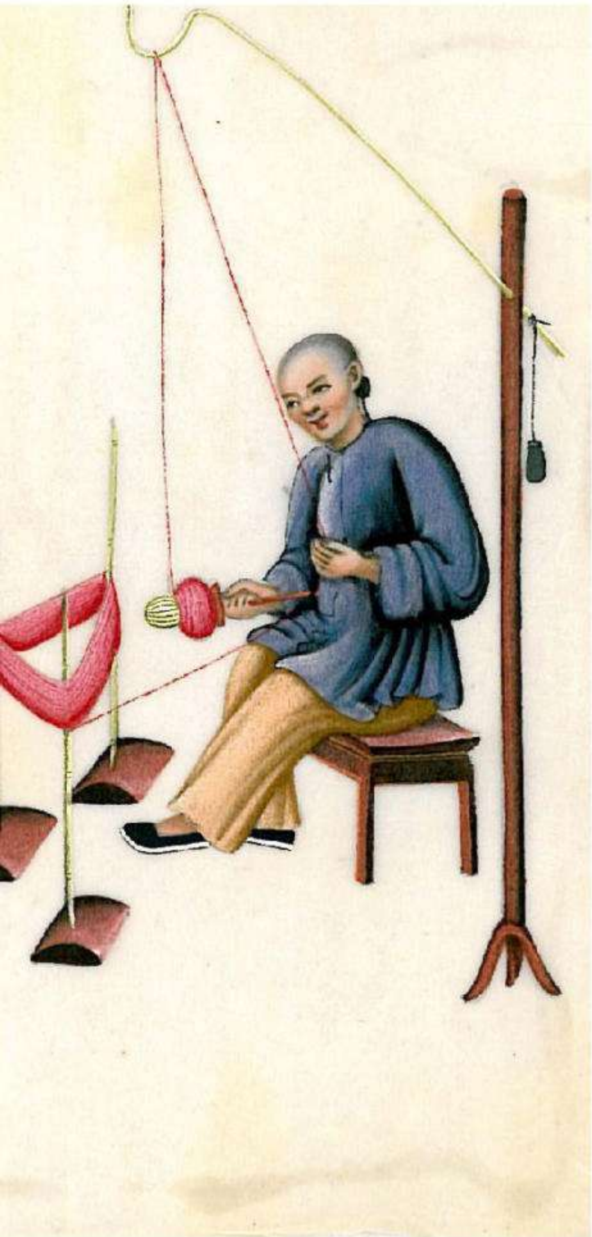
The Chinese appreciated the value that silk had to outsiders. Though in some periods cloth made from hemp was considered of higher status because it was rarer than silk cloth it was obvious that other people were more interested in silk. It may be that gifts of silk sent to other nations as a form of diplomacy were the way silk was first introduced to many places. In the 2nd century BCE the Han dynasty arranged a peace treaty with the Xiongnu nomadic tribe in an attempt to stop raids into their territory. Alongside giving a Chinese princess as a bride they sent silk fabrics as the most valuable of their gifts.

Silk had been known outside of China for some time. A scrap of silk was discovered in the hair of an Egyptian woman who had been mummified around 1,000 BCE but there is no evidence of a wide-scale trade outside of China until much later.

China's initial forays into the West and what would become the Silk Roads were not financially motivated but instead driven by a desire for protection from outside interference, as well as the need to import certain things. The horses of Ferghana were immensely coveted by the Chinese. Just as silk was an easy way to trade within China it was also an easy way to trade with outsiders. Silk was also an ideal way to pay Chinese soldiers at their frontiers, which had the unintended consequence of further spreading silk. The Chinese may in fact have stumbled into the silk trade by their dealings with people such as the Xiongnu.

The first envoy sent by the Chinese, Zhang Qian, to the people of Ferghana in the 2nd century BCE was amazed to find the number of Chinese goods available in the markets along the route. These had not been officially sanctioned but merely spread out of China as people traded among themselves. We also know from surviving Chinese documents that other envoys on official duties used the opportunity of their travels to perform some personal trading as a sideline on their journeys. When silk was given to nearby tribes as tribute it was also disseminated by those tribes to their neighbours, increasing the number of people who knew of silk and who wanted it for themselves. Since the Chinese kept the processes of producing silk a closely guarded secret they had a monopoly that they could exploit. Soon silk was being carried out of China to the south-west and large amounts of money and goods were flowing back into China. This soon became a vital revenue stream for Chinese leaders.

The secrecy around silk production in Japan led to several myths about its source. The

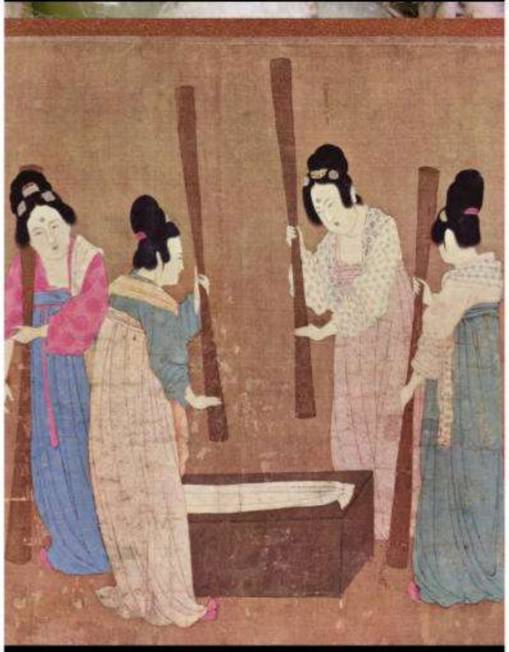


encyclopedist Pliny the Elder thought that it was made from a downy hair that grew on leaves the Chinese combed into thread. The author of a 1st century CE book called the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* written in Egypt described what he knew of the origin of silk. "Beyond this region [is an island in the sea off the Ganges]… where the sea ends somewhere on the outer fringe, there is a very great inland city called Thina from which silk floss, yarn, and cloth are shipped by land … and via the Ganges River…. It is not easy to get to this Thina; for rarely do people come from it, and only a few."

The money raised by the silk trade was so vital that several Chinese emperors issued decrees attempting to protect it. Anyone found trying to smuggle silkworms or their eggs out of China was to be put to death. It seems to have been effective as for centuries the Chinese remained the only source of silk. Eventually however the secret did get out. Around 300 CE immigrants from Korea, which had been under Chinese control, carried the secret to Japan. By the 6th century CE the Byzantine empire had also been able to begin producing silk - legend has it that Emperor Justinian sent two monks to China who smuggled silkworm eggs out in their walking sticks, wrapped in dung to keep them warm.

Though others could now produce silk, the Chinese remained the dominant source for high quality silk throughout the Middle Ages. The roads that carried that silk out of China would develop into the trade network that joined the East and West: the Silk Road.

Silk is the by-product of silkworms developing into moths - though those used in the silk industry die before they become moths



This 12th century CE painting shows Chinese court ladies pounding silk threads before they were woven into cloth

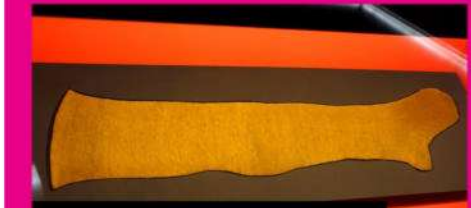
## Silk from the sea

### It's not just silkworms that produce the material; a large bivalve mollusc that lives in the Mediterranean does too

Insects were not the only animals that produced a highly prized fabric in antiquity. A large bivalve mollusc, Pinna nobilis, that lives in the Mediterranean uses fine filaments to attach its shell to rocks. For the mollusc these fibres make a strong anchor but for humans they are a source of a fine material known as sea silk.

Sea silk has been recorded since the 2nd century CE when a Greek writer described a 'Wool of the Sea'. Tertullian mentions "the sea yields fleeces, inasmuch as the more brilliant shells of a mossy wooliness furnish a hairy stuff." Other ancient sources describe how valuable items of clothing made from sea silk were – a Persian scholar said a sea silk robe cost more than 1,000 gold pieces.

Perhaps the most surprising fact about sea silk is that it was sought after by the Chinese. In the Han dynasty it was imported all the way from Europe where it was thought to grow on 'water sheep.' Though coarser than silk produced by silkworms sea silk was valued because of its rich golden hue. Today only a single woman living in Italy keeps the production of sea silk alive.



Sea silk could not be produced in large quantities so its scarcity, and golden hue, made it highly valuable

Image source: Wiki:Daderot

> "Though coarser than silk produced by silkworms sea silk was valued because of its rich golden hue"

# Before the Silk Road

*Long before there was a recognised route linking China and Europe trade between cultures flourished for thousands of years*

Written by Ben Gazur

**When it comes to the ancient world we imagine an insular place of little communities that had few dealings with those outside. With few written sources it can be hard to comprehend how our ancestors lived. But archaeological discoveries are showing just how rich the trading networks were that connected nations before the Silk Roads were created.**

We know from ancient sources such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* how important goods like cedar wood were in the Near East. Growing mainly in Lebanon the wood from these trees was sailed down rivers, hauled across land, and disseminated to anywhere that could trade for it. Perhaps the best evidence for trade across continents in the ancient world is provided by amber. Amber is only found in very rare locations and for prehistoric people the best available source was in the Baltic.

Here amber would occasionally wash up on shore. So prized was it for its beautiful colours that it was traded across Europe and beyond. Amber beads dating from 3,000 BCE have been found in Egypt. Nor was the trade all in one direction - Egyptian glass beads have been found in high-status Nordic burials.

As nations and empires began to emerge trade became more formalised. Taxes could be extracted from import and export that were vital to rulers. Whatever they could do to encourage trade was a benefit to them. In the Persian Empire under King Darius various existing roads were improved and built on to create a road that spanned from the Mediterranean sea to the capital at Susa over 1,600 miles away. This Royal Road allowed messengers to speed across the empire but also encouraged trade between cities.

The Royal Road may have been one of antiquity's greatest achievements but trade had managed perfectly well without it for millennia.

*"Perhaps the best evidence for trade across continents in the ancient world is provided by amber"*

## A TIMELINE OF TRADE

### DEFINING MOMENT

**Spinning silk**

Silk is created by the larvae of silkworm moths to protect their cocoons during development. At some point around 5,000 years ago Chinese cloth workers found a way to unspool this silk from cocoons, spin fine thread from it, and weave that thread into a gorgeous fabric. Silk fabric is strong, smooth, and cool in summer so was quickly adopted by elite members of society. Other cultures that came into contact with the Chinese soon developed a taste for silk and trading was fierce. The outward spread of silk from China was key in the development of the later Silk Roads.

### DEFINING MOMENT

**Zhang Qian takes a trip** **138 BCE**

The Han Chinese tired of dealing with the Xiongnu and wished to find allies that could help them. The Emperor Wu dispatched an envoy named Zhang Qian to the west to try and create alliances. During his journeys Zhang explored both the northern and southern routes around the Tarim Basin that would become major paths on the Silk Road. During his mission he discovered strong horses of a type unavailable to the Chinese - attempts to get access to these drove future Chinese expansion. Zhang also noted Chinese goods for sale in distant markets and realised that there were profits to be made.

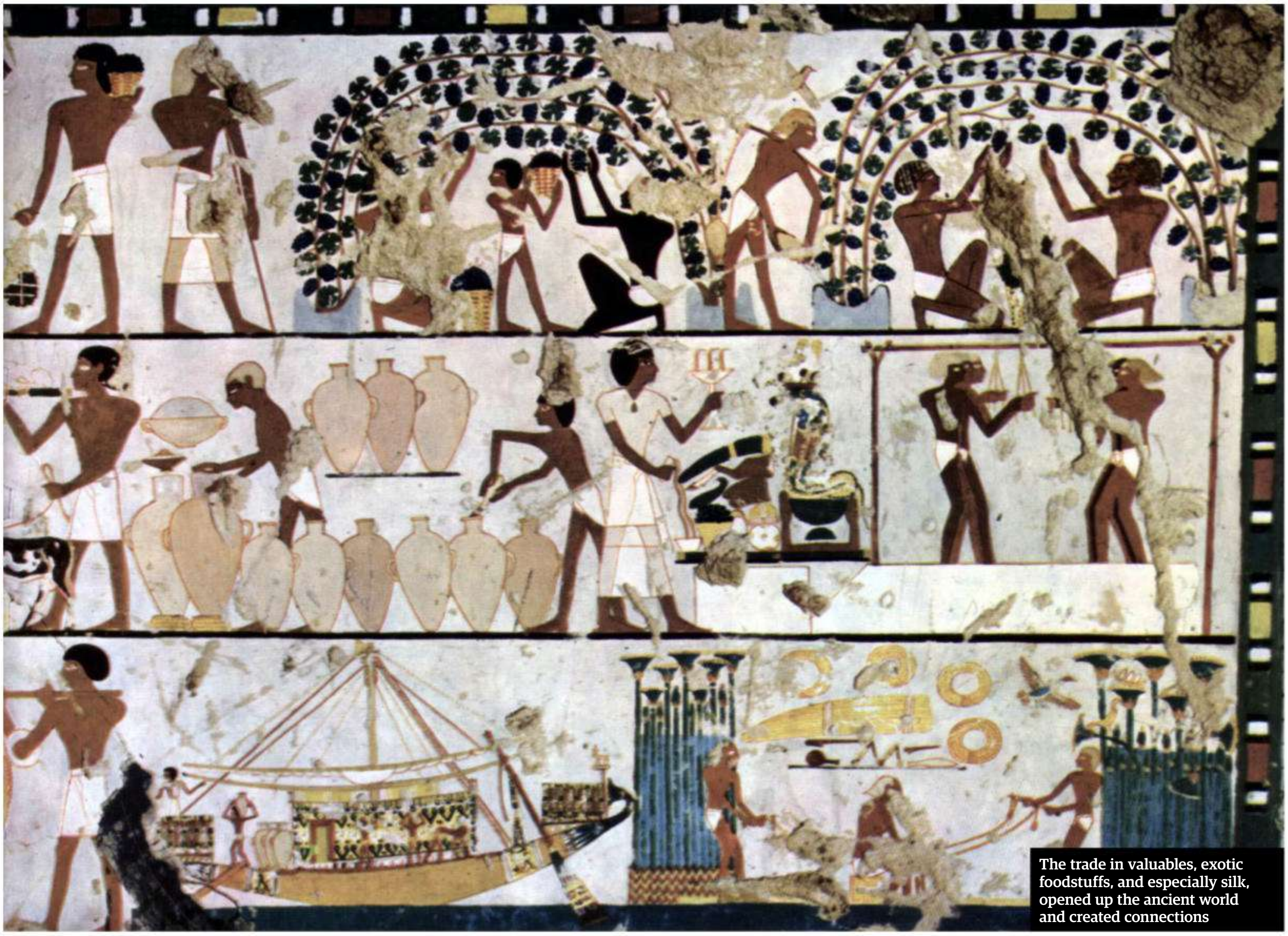
● **Lapis lazuli crosses mountains**
**5,000 BCE**
Mined only in the mountains of Afghanistan, lapis lazuli beads that are 7,000 years old have been found in Pakistan. Soon trade in the precious stone would reach Mesopotamia and further west into Egypt.

● **Domesticating camels**
**2,500 BCE**
To cover the distances between towns in inhospitable regions required more than just manpower. Camels were the perfect beast of burden for traders as they could carry great weights and traverse rough terrain.

● **Darius the Great's road**
**500 BCE**
Darius the Great took the various routes through his empire and reorganised them. He created the Royal Road system that allowed swift transport of goods and news from the Mediterranean to Central Asia.

● **Xiongnu incursions**
**200 BCE**
The nomadic tribes of the Xiongnu often raided Han Chinese territory. Bought off with gifts of silk and other goods the Xiongnu dispersed Chinese luxuries into Asia - starting a trade that soon became profitable.

● **Religions on the move**
**1st century CE**
Buddhism, which developed in India, was introduced to China by monks following the Silk Roads. The first texts of Buddhism to be translated into Chinese were probably made from Sogdian translations.

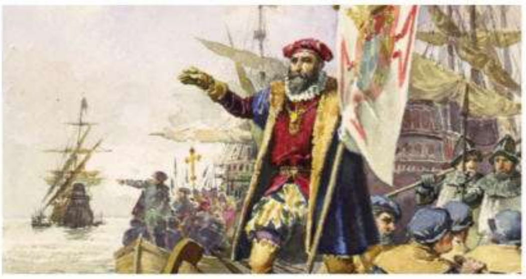


The trade in valuables, exotic foodstuffs, and especially silk, opened up the ancient world and created connections

## DEFINING MOMENT

### The Cape of Good Hope 1490s

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 severely disrupted trade from the Silk Roads into Europe. In 1488 a Portuguese captain called Bartolomeu Dias discovered the Cape of Good Hope, the southernmost point of the African continent. Searching for a route around Africa into the Indian Ocean Vasco da Gama led an expedition which reached India by sea. There he established trading rights with the local ruler and returned to Portugal to great acclaim. The monopoly on spice trading by the Venetians was broken and their price fell sparking a boom in trade between Europe and Asia by sea.



**Sogdian Empire**
**5th-8th centuries**
Sogdian merchants had plied their wares across the Silk Road since it formed. But in the 5th century they began to raise an empire based on trade centred in the fabled market city of Samarkand.

**Battle of Talas**
**751**
The Islamic Abbasid Caliphate did battle with the Tang Chinese for control of Central Asia in 751. The caliphate won control of the profitable trade routes in the area. Knowledge of papermaking is said to have moved west with captive Chinese soldiers.

**Tang naval voyages**
**800 CE**
Maritime routes became as important as land roads as Chinese ships sailed as far as the Red Sea. Foreign ships reached China too – "many big ships came from Borneo, Persia, Qunglun with…spices, pearls, and jade piled up mountain high."

**Marco Polo reaches China**
**1275**
Marco Polo travelled with his trading family overland into Asia where he met with Kublai Khan. While not the first European to reach China he left the first detailed account – even if some scholars doubt its veracity.

The ease with which bronze could be cast allowed entirely new forms of tools and weapons to be developed

# The ancient bronze trade

*Bronze reforged human societies – and the scarcity of its ingredients changed forever the way they interacted*

**Bronze was the wonder material of the ancient world. It was a metal that could be cast using simple pottery moulds to create tools for farming or swords that could hold an edge better than any other material known. So valuable was it to all aspects of ancient life that whenever a culture developed the ability to create bronze we term that as their Bronze Age. For much of the Middle East this occurred around 3,300-1,200 BCE and it led to advances in many areas but most importantly in trade.**

## A RECIPE FOR INNOVATION

Bronze is not like other metals available in the ancient world. While gold, silver, and copper can all be found in pure elemental forms bronze is an alloy that is made by mixing copper with either tin or arsenic. Copper flashes prettily and can create a sharp blade but it is a relatively soft metal so swords and tools made from it soon break or blunt. Bronze outperforms copper in almost every way – except availability.

Copper ores from which copper can be smelted can be found in many places. It is thought that bronze developed accidentally in sites where the copper ores naturally had high levels of arsenic. During the smelting process this arsenic mixed with the copper and a bronze alloy was formed. Over time metal workers learned how to control the amounts of arsenic in their bronze to achieve desired strengths and appearances. Arsenic however had deadly consequences for those working with it and an alternative was soon found. Bronze can also be created by adding tin to copper.

Tin has its own drawbacks however. It is a rare element to find and the most common ore of tin, cassiterite, was not available in many places. Where it was discovered, such as at Deh Hosein in Iran, it was rapidly exploited. Tools and evidence of smelting have been found there that show tin was dug up there in the 2nd millennium BCE.

Since bronze was so vital to ancient weaponry and technology high prices were paid for tin wherever it could be found. Where people are willing to trade paths will always be found to get goods to them.

## OVER LAND, OVER SEA

Afghanistan may have been one of the first sources for tin that was discovered. Tin ores are known to be found there and bronze emerged in the Middle East at an early date. Unfortunately there is little archaeological evidence for a trade in tin in the region but if the first tin ores were collected from river beds, where they naturally wash out, and all the tin was used in bronze creation then there would be little record left for scholars to find.

Written records of tin trade occur surprisingly early. From the city of Assur, capital of the Assyrian Empire, in the 19th century BCE we find accounts kept of how tin was brought to the city. Caravans of donkeys were used as each was able to carry around 65 kg of tin ingots over long distances. While we are not told exactly where the tin came from we do know that the donkeys headed east with supplies of gold and silver but returned loaded down with tin.

Fortunately there are places where direct and ancient trade can be found. In the 14th century BCE a ship sank off the coast of Uluburun in modern day Turkey. Among the items that have been recovered from this wreck are ingots of 11 tons of copper and 1 ton of tin - the exact proportions needed to make 11 tons of bronze.

It is thought that this ship which carried goods from Canaan and Egypt was sailing north towards Mycenaean Greece on either a trade or diplomatic mission.

## ACROSS CONTINENTS

Shipping was by far the easiest way to trade in tin because of its weight. A single ship was able to carry many tons where dozens of donkeys would otherwise be needed to carry it over rough terrain and crossing multiple kingdoms. This could be difficult. Perhaps the first embargo in history occurred when a Hittite king in 1225 BCE told the king of Amurru that "Your merchant shall not go to Assyria, and you shall not allow his merchant into your land."

Beyond dealings with obstreperous royalty personal matters between traders could cause difficulties. One trader named Nanni in 1750 BCE wrote a letter of complaint to a business man he had been dealing with. "When you came, you said to me as follows: "I will give Gimil-Sin (when he comes) fine quality copper ingots." You left then but you did not do what you promised me. You put ingots which were not good before my messenger (Sit-Sin) and said: "If you want to take them, take them; if you do not want to take them, go away!"" Much easier to simply load a boat and sail it to your destination.

Ancient Greek sources thought that one of the best sources of tin were islands at the edge of the known world in the north that they called the Cassiterides. For many years this led to the idea that tin was being mined in Cornwall, where it is plentiful, and being traded into Europe and beyond. This remained conjecture until scientific advances allowed us to measure the ratio of atomic isotopes in metal that act like fingerprints in identifying sources of tin.

A beautiful artefact known as the Nebra Sky Disk which appears to show images of the moon and stars was discovered in modern day Germany that dates from around 1,600 BCE. Analysis showed that it contained both gold and tin mined in Cornwall. We also now know that Cornish tin reached the Middle East, probably by a route that crossed both land and sea, after tin ingots from the 13th century BCE were found in Israel.

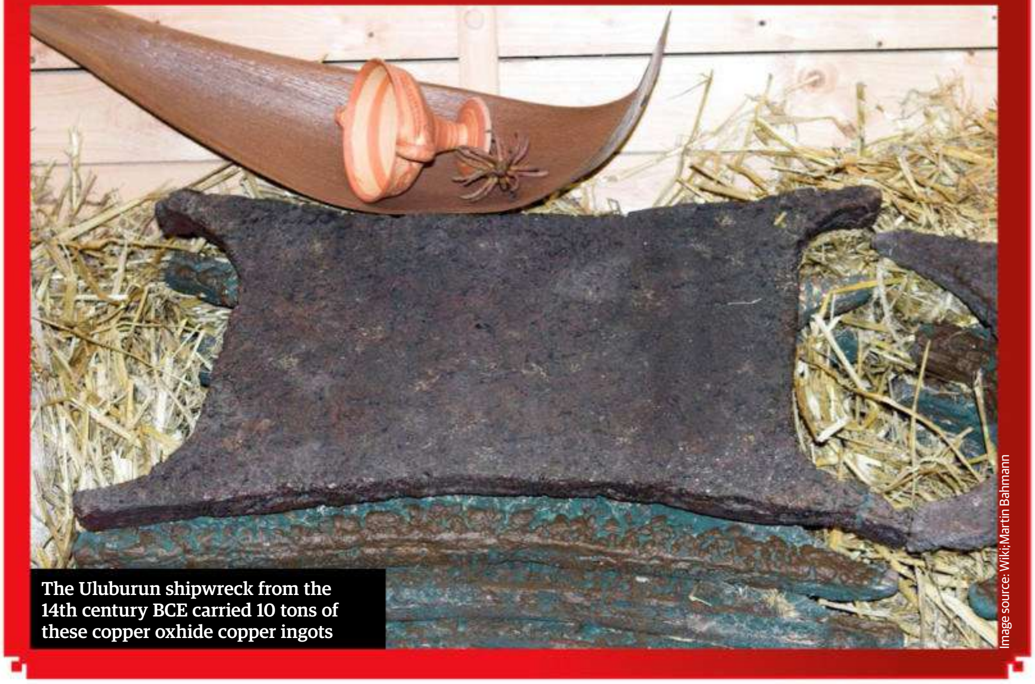
The ancient world may have had little idea where their tin came from, but they definitely knew they wanted it no matter the distance.

## Metal ox hides

Across the Mediterranean and throughout the Bronze Age a single style of metal ingots emerged. Shaped roughly like an ox hide these blocks of metal have been found in Crete, Cyprus, Italy, Egypt, and Bulgaria. Their images appear in art across different cultures.

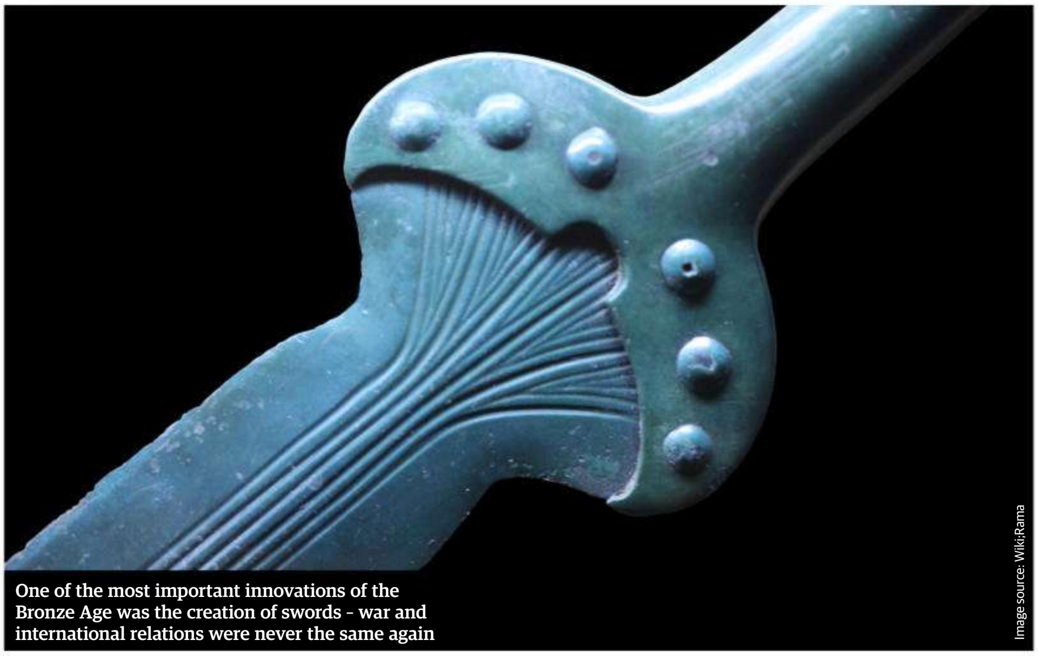
Early scholars suggested that the shape of oxhide ingots might be an indication of their value. One ingot was worth one ox. With better understandings of ancient economies this is now seen as a fanciful notion. The best explanation for their shape it that they allowed for easier loading onto pack animals. Those ingots with pronounced handles at the edges would also be easier for people to handle.

The shape also probably told buyers that what they were purchasing was of a certain quality. Those copper and tin ingots that have survived have purities above 99%. Ancient metallurgy was surprisingly sophisticated and the ratio of copper to tin in bronze was tightly controlled.



The Uluburun shipwreck from the 14th century BCE carried 10 tons of these copper oxhide copper ingots

Image source: Wiki/Martin Bahmann



One of the most important innovations of the Bronze Age was the creation of swords - war and international relations were never the same again

Image source: Wiki/Rama

# The flow of spices

*The humble spices we take for granted were once carried thousands of miles by land and sea – carrying more than trade in their wake*

Given the difficult journeys of many spices on their way to foreign markets some of them were worth more than their weight in gold

Image source: Wiki:Miomir Magdevski

**Today spices are no further away than the nearest shop. In the ancient world a spice might not even be on the same continent as you. If it was simply a matter of flavouring food then spice might not have driven trade, but in antiquity spices and medicines went hand in hand. The more exotic and fragrant a spice was the more efficacious it was likely to be in healing. And the larger the prices demanded.**

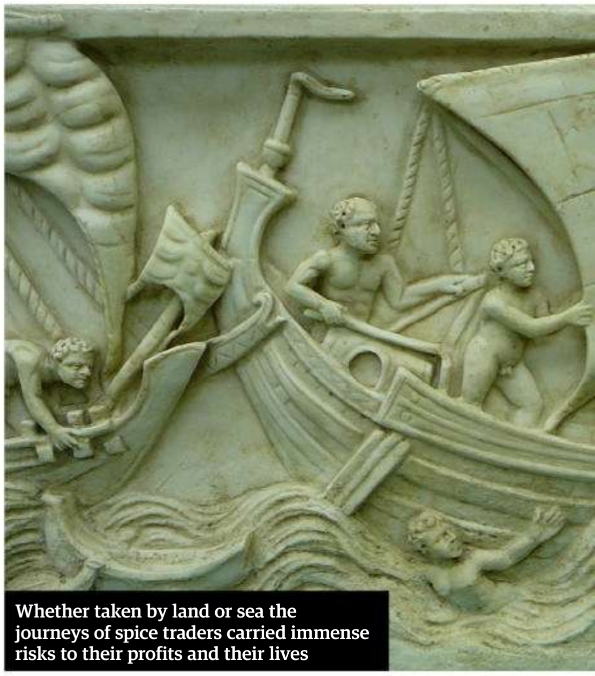
## SPICES OF ANTIQUITY

Egyptian papyri name coriander, fennel, juniper, cumin, garlic and thyme as being among the herbs that were to be used in medicine. Even when they failed to effect cures spices were still highly valued in Egypt. Herodotus mentions how "the purest myrrh, cassia, and every other sort of spicery except frankincense" were used in the embalming of Egyptian mummies.

Persian rulers were famed for their 'paradeisos' – gardens so fabulous that they sparked the word 'paradise' in English. In the garden of King Marduk-apla-iddina who reigned in the 710s BCE a clay tablet recorded over 60 types of plant. Among the medicinal thyme, fennel, and fenugreek we get mysterious names like shita-spice and bird-dung plant. A later list for the garden of King Ashurbanipal records thyme, sesame, cardamom, turmeric, saffron, poppy, garlic, cumin, anise, coriander, silphium, dill, and myrrh. Not all plants could be grown everywhere however. For some spices you had to travel.

On the wall of the tomb of Queen Hatshepsut there is the record of a trade mission that she had sent to the land of Punt around 1,500 BCE. A fleet of ships and traders were sent out onto the Red Sea and down the Somali coast. From Punt her ships returned loaded with gold, ivory, live trees, myrrh, and spices.

It is not at all clear whether the spices that returned from Punt were originally grown there or imported from elsewhere. A 1st century CE Greek text describes the spices cinnamon and cassia as coming from the Horn of Africa, the approximate location of the land of Punt. Yet we now know



Whether taken by land or sea the journeys of spice traders carried immense risks to their profits and their lives

> *"We know from archaeological finds that the tables of Roman Britain were well stocked with spices. We must therefore reconstruct an ancient world that was criss-crossed with trading networks"*

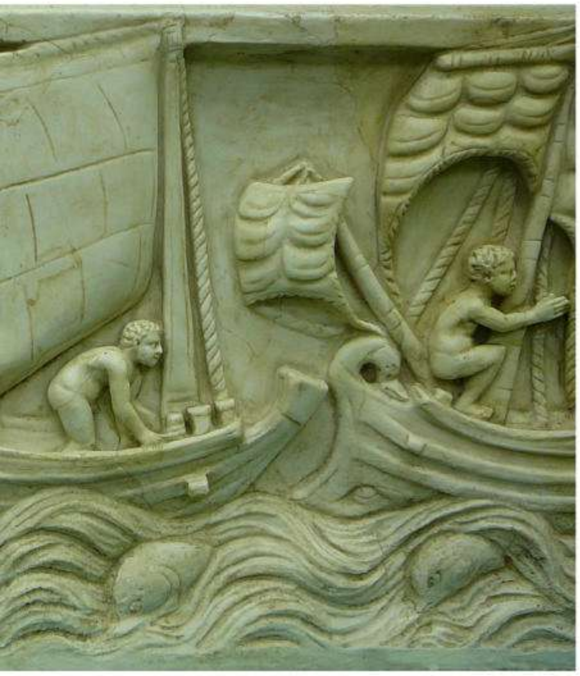
that these spices grow in East Asia. Perhaps what made this region of Africa so attractive to Egyptian traders was not just the natural resources found there but its busy ports.

Finds from a Roman port at Quseir al-Q on the Red Sea in modern Egypt reveal how spices reached the Roman Empire, and from where. Graffiti in the ancient ruins dating from the 2nd century CE shows the Indian name Catan, and fragments in a script used in the Tamil language. Also discovered with these were ancient peppercorns. There was a network of trade in spice that linked the fringes of the Roman world all the way to islands beside the Pacific Ocean.

## THE SPICE ISLANDS

The earliest trade in spices into Europe and the Middle East were conducted by land. Merchants with beasts of burden struggled across large distances to bring their expensive wares to eager buyers. Yet land was only one of the ways that peppercorns from India or Chinese cassia could cross the world.

The long distance led to legends springing up. Cassia, made from a Chinese tree's bark was known to ancient Greeks like Herodotus. He described how it was gathered, even while being mistaken about where it was from. "When the Arabians go out to collect cassia, they cover all their body and their face with the hides of oxen and other skins, leaving only holes for the eyes, and, thus protected, go in search of the cassia, which grows in a lake of no great depth. All round the shores and in the lake itself there dwell a number of winged animals, much resembling bats, which screech horribly, and are very valiant. These creatures they must keep from their eyes all the while that they gather the cassia." For some spices though bats were not the worst thing to be faced - the sea had to be braved.



The islands of South East Asia were probably home to some of the great early seafarers. Population dispersion and migration in the region occurred around 40,000 years ago and there is evidence of deep sea fishing from around 30,000 years ago. Trading between islands for scarce resources would have been important. When the people of the Malaku Islands learned what they possessed they soon exploited it.

The Malaku islands in modern Indonesia were once the world's sole source of cinnamon and nutmeg. The conditions on the islands were such that these were the only places that the trees would grow. The would later earn the name the Spice Islands for their bounty.

Archaeological evidence of the spice trade from these islands has been found from a port on Sri Lanka where ancient cloves were found. By the time cloves reached Sri Lanka they would have either crossed 7,000 km of ocean or been transported northwards from the Spice Islands and carried across Asia.

## A WORLDWIDE TRADE

We know from archaeological finds like the Hoxne Hoard that contained a Roman pepper-pot shaped like a lady that the tables of Roman Britain were well stocked with spices from throughout their extensive empire and beyond. We must therefore reconstruct an ancient world that, far from being insular and limited in its scope, was criss-crossed with trading networks. A nutmeg from the Spice Islands might be loaded on a ship and sailed thousands of kilometres to Sri Lanka. There it could sail on to the Horn of Africa. On Red Sea it would be handed over to a caravan of merchants who marched it to the Nile. Loaded on a ship it could pass up to the Mediterranean and on to the edge of the Roman Empire. No wonder that in later centuries some unscrupulous sellers of nutmeg were known to carve false ones out of wood to sell to unsuspecting buyers. It was a lot easier in the long run.

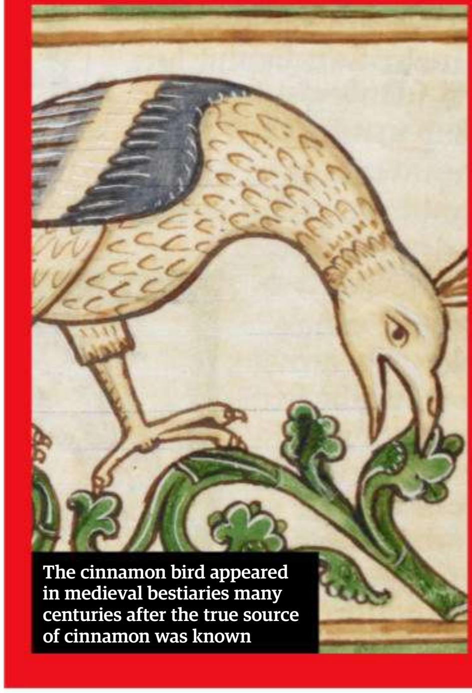
## The cinnamon bird

### Whether it was a small bird or a more ferocious animal, traders are said to have collected cinnamon from it to sell

Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BCE, told a strange story about how traders in cinnamon went about collecting their spices. He knew little of the origins of cinnamon, writing "Where it comes from and what land produces it they cannot say." But he did know just how difficult it was to get.

Cinnamon, he tells us, was collected by a bird that used the sticks to craft its nests by sticking them in mud on high and inaccessible cliffs. Wily traders managed to get their hands on it by cutting "oxen and asses and other beasts of burden" up - but into large chunks. These were irresistible to the cinnamon birds who swooped down and flew with them back to their nests. Unfortunately their nests were not strong enough to hold the weight of meat placed in them and tumbled to the ground. The traders then picked up the cinnamon and sold it off.

In later legend the cinnamon bird, called the cinnamologus, became a ferocious and large animal. Traders of cinnamon were happy to tell this tale to their clients because the harder it was imagined cinnamon was to gather the more they could charge for it.



The cinnamon bird appeared in medieval bestiaries many centuries after the true source of cinnamon was known

# The divine lapis lazuli

*Bronze was useful, and spices had healing powers, but humans crave beautiful objects too and in the ancient world lapis lazuli was the most desired stone of all*

**Lapis lazuli is one of the most startling minerals that the earth brings forth. Its intense blue is a colour that is rarely seen in nature. As it can be carved into various shapes or cut into thin slices it has been used to decorate objects for thousands of years. Like many valuable resources it is only found in a few hard to reach places – yet it has been found at archaeological sites thousands of miles from its source.**

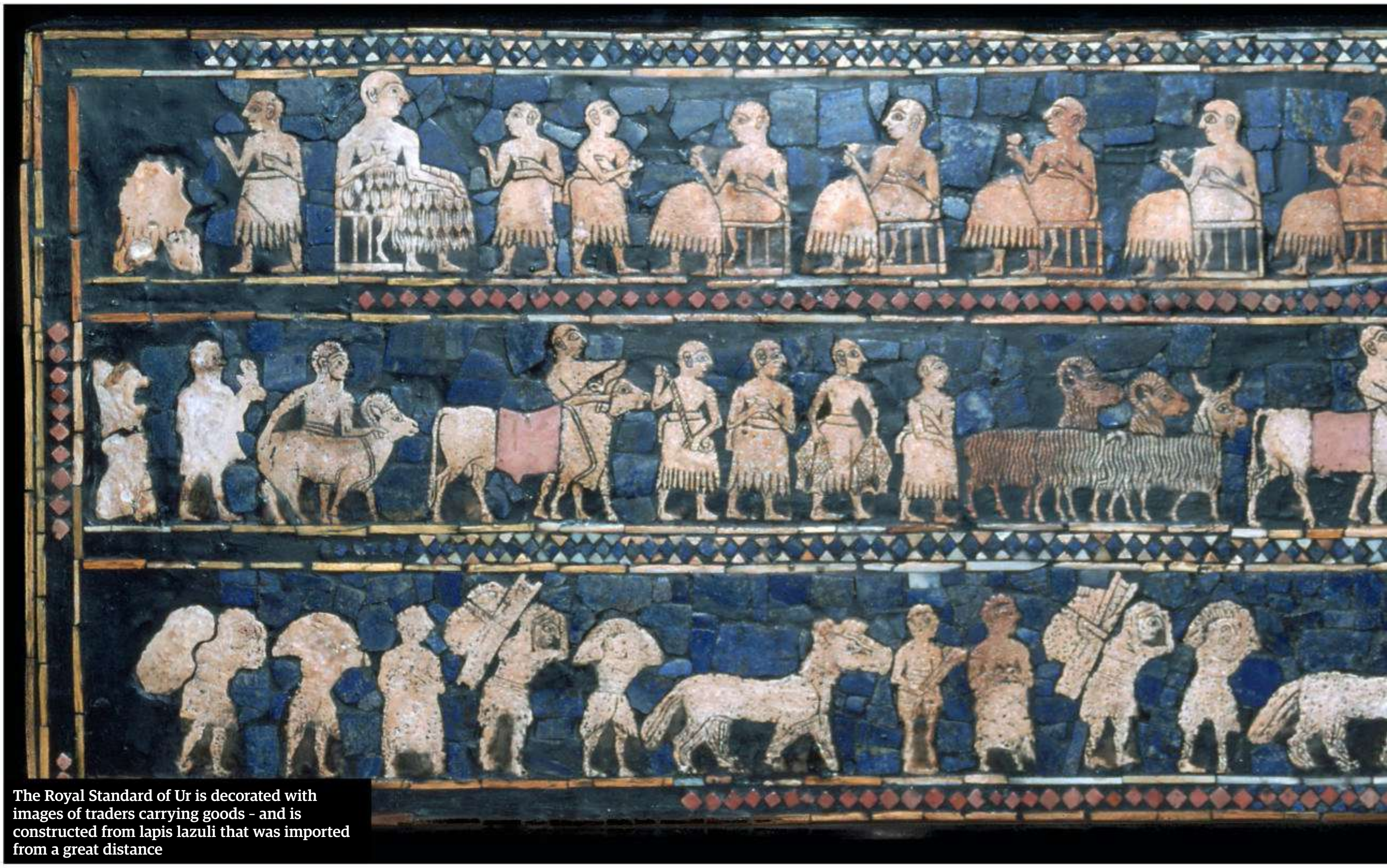
## STRIKING LAPIS LAZULI

While Egyptian and Middle Eastern artefacts from at least the 3rd millennium BCE made from lapis have been found, there is no source of the stone in either location. The nearest point at which it can be mined is the Badakhshan Mountains in the north-east of Afghanistan. Evidence from the mines points to them having been worked as much as 7,000 years ago.

The mines as Sar-i-Sang in this region are still worked today and can only be reached by roads that zig-zag up mountains. Given the weather conditions lapis lazuli could only have been mined for a few months each year. It is unlikely that this level of effort in extracting a pretty but otherwise useless stone would have taken place unless there was economic benefit from doing it.

While the earliest records we have do not give an exact location for their sources of lapis lazuli an inscription from the palace of Darius the Great, ~500 BCE, boasts of the materials used to construct his luxurious home. "The precious stone lapis lazuli and carnelian which was wrought here, this was brought from Sogdia." Sogdia at that time would have included Badakhshan.

Once lapis lazuli was mined it could be divided into two qualities. The purest blue portions of true lapis would be worked into the highest status items such as jewellery while that which showed flecks of white and other colours could be turned into larger objects. Lapis is sufficiently soft to be shaped with copper or bronze tools but can also be polished to a radiant gloss. While beads are by far the most common example of lapis in the archaeological record occasionally cups and bowls made from single pieces of stone have been discovered. Chemical analysis of these items has tied most of them to the ancient mines of Afghanistan.



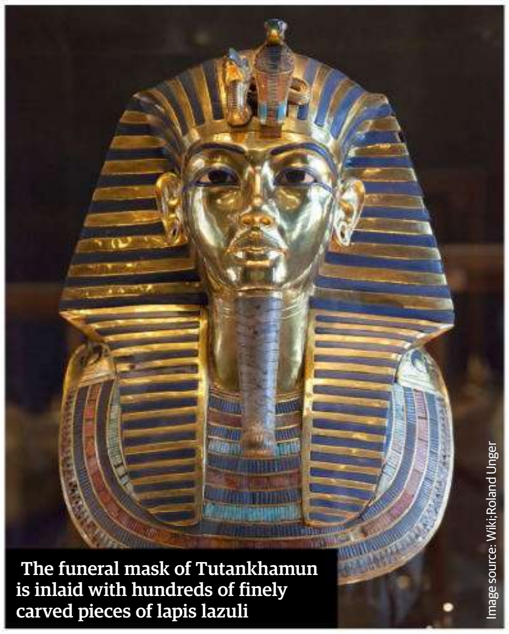
The Royal Standard of Ur is decorated with images of traders carrying goods – and is constructed from lapis lazuli that was imported from a great distance

## TRADING THE STONE

There is very little evidence of fine working of lapis lazuli in Afghanistan. It seems most likely that once mined it was transported immediately out of the region. The Indus Valley civilisations did make use of lapis, with small lapis beads from the 7th millennium BCE being found there, but to a far lesser extent than in cultures to the west. Given the abundance of lapis artefacts in Egypt and Mesopotamia most of it must have found itself heading south and west from Afghanistan.

In the millennia before around 600 BCE neither the Mesopotamians nor the Egyptians controlled the source of lapis lazuli. To get it they would have had to deal with multiple intermediate traders who would each cover a portion of the total route the lapis would eventually cross. This drove up prices as each merchant had to make a profit. There were no shortcuts in the lapis trade.

We may not know the exact route lapis lazuli took out of Afghanistan but we can know more about ancient trade routes by studying its spread. In an account from Sumer dating from the 21st century BCE called *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* there are many mentions of lapis that could point to a disruption of its trade. In the tale King Enmerkar seems to have stopped trade with Aratta. He reopens them and commands the people of Aratta to supply him with luxuries. “Let them cut the flawless lapis lazuli from the blocks, let them [...] the translucence of the flawless lapis lazuli.” Intriguingly this tale may relate to a real disruption in the trade of lapis lazuli. In Egypt lapis is found both before the 1st Dynasty and after the 3rd Dynasty but there is an approximately 200 year gap in which none has been recovered. This could be due to a destabilisation in either the region where lapis was mined or the areas it had to pass through to reach Egypt.



The funeral mask of Tutankhamun is inlaid with hundreds of finely carved pieces of lapis lazuli

Image source: Wiki;Roland Unger

While during antiquity the majority of lapis lazuli would have been transported over land to its final destination there is some evidence that it was also carried by sea-going vessels. An excavation on Tarut Island off the coast of Saudi Arabia discovered large chunks of lapis that suggest it was being carried there for trade. It may have been worked there into more valuable items or merely been a stopping point on a large trade network.

## USING LAPIS LAZULI

Given the high value of lapis lazuli its use was restricted to the very wealthiest. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia it had divine attributes. The goddess Inana is described as draping beads of lapis around her neck. When she faces being trapped in the Underworld Inana is warned of the terrible fate that may befall her. “Don’t let your precious lapis lazuli be split there with the mason’s stone.”

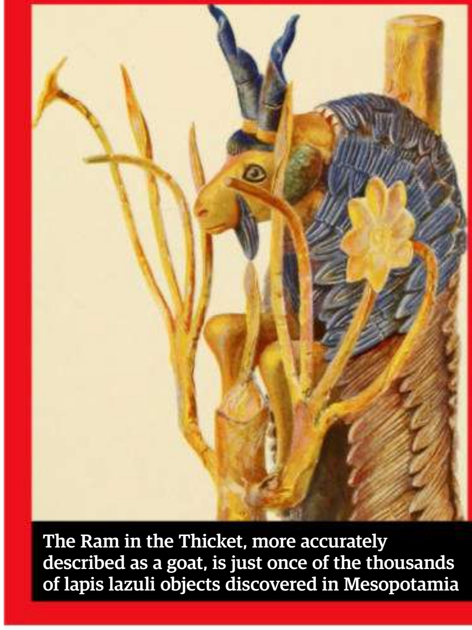
Kings, queens, and other important people were often accompanied into the grave by lapis artefacts. The famous funerary mask of the pharaoh Tutankhamun glimmers with the deep blue of lapis inlay. Lesser mortals might have rings, necklaces, or single beads included in their funeral goods. You wouldn’t want to be caught dead without your lapis lazuli.

## The Ram in the Thicket

### This elaborate pair of Mesopotamian statues include lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, over 2000 kilometres away

The Ram in the Thicket is how a pair of Mesopotamian statues are described. Dating from around 2,500 BCE, they were constructed from gold, copper, seashells, wood, and intricately carved lapis lazuli. They show the artistic achievements, and the trade networks of the time, better than any other objects could. When they were discovered in the 1920s they had been crushed flat by the weight of soil on top of them because the wooden cores they were constructed around had rotted away. The thin layers of gold had to be delicately reshaped so that they could once again take their original shape. The purpose of the two statues is unclear but they may have supported bowls.

The statues are important as beautiful objects in themselves but also inform us about the ways in which lapis lazuli was seen in Mesopotamia. The stone may have had religious associations, as it is often mentioned in religious stories, but it was also a luxury commodity. The Queen’s Lyre, from the graveyard in Ur, has an elaborate bull’s head decoration where the bull is given an extravagant beard made of lapis. It was a stone meant to be used as well as valued.



The Ram in the Thicket, more accurately described as a goat, is just once of the thousands of lapis lazuli objects discovered in Mesopotamia

During the Shang dynasty, it was believed that the Shang king could use oracle bones to consult with the gods

Image source: Chez Càsver (Xuan Che)

# The Annals of ancient China

*Rich in ambition, powerplay and conflict, the Annals of ancient China hold the roots of the most enduring cultures on Earth*

**Written by Catherine Curzon**

**Today China is a global superpower, but it rose from a history of dynastic conflict and power struggles. Those struggles began with the Xia dynasty, who held power from the days of Yu the Great in 2070 until 1600BCE.**

For many years historians were divided on whether the Xia era had existed only in myth but in 1959, excavations in Henan uncovered evidence of early civilisations and the Xia dynasty was accepted as a matter of historical record.

The last ruler of the Xia was Jie of Xia, a corrupt and unpopular king. He incurred the wrath of the people thanks to his profligate spending on luxuries including a palace that took the better part of a decade to build and cost the life of thousands of slaves. Furious at their ruler's selfishness, the angry tribes who were suffering under Jie's rule turned to Tang of Shang for help. Tang, who ruled the territory of Shang, was descended from a line of legendary rulers, and he was biding his time until he was ready to strike.

The reckoning came at the Battle of Mingtiao in 1600 BCE. When the armies of Shang and Xia met on the battlefield, the Xia soldiers turned tail and fled. Power passed into the hands of Tang of Shang and his dynasty ruled until 1046 BCE. After watching the people rise up against Jie, Tang was determined to be a very different sort of ruler. He ordered an immediate halt to the extravagant building projects that threatened to bankrupt the kingdom, as well as lowering taxes and fostering a culture of learning and civility. The Shang dynasty coincided with China's Bronze Age and the fateful growth of silk production.

> *"Silk soon became a symbol of wealth and prestige amongst the powerful elite in China's neighbouring countries"*

The secret of silk production was one that China closely guarded and its scarcity made it a much sought-after commodity. Silk soon became a symbol of wealth and prestige amongst the powerful elite in China's neighbouring countries. and as it did, China's prestige on the Asian stage grew with it.

Within the borders of China, the world was changing. Having dethroned a ruling dynasty, the Shang monarchs were keen to cement their claim to the throne and during their reign ancestor worship flourished, with the Chinese worshipping many gods and their deceased ancestors, presided over by the god Shangti, the Great Ancestor. Shangti was the link between gods and humans and the Shang monarch was his representative on earth, supposedly chosen by the deities.

During the six centuries of Shang rule, the capital city moved no less than six times, eventually settling in Yin. This move ushered in the golden age of the dynasty, which earned rulers during this period the title of the Yin dynasty. The Shang dynasty practised human sacrifice and was based on agriculture, but this was no primitive culture. In fact, the Shang had a full written language and many examples of Shang oracle bones have been found, with which the people communicated with the heavens, whilst evidence exists to suggest that Shang astronomers made celestial observations including sighting Mars.

Events from these periods were recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, one of the Five Classics of Chinese literature

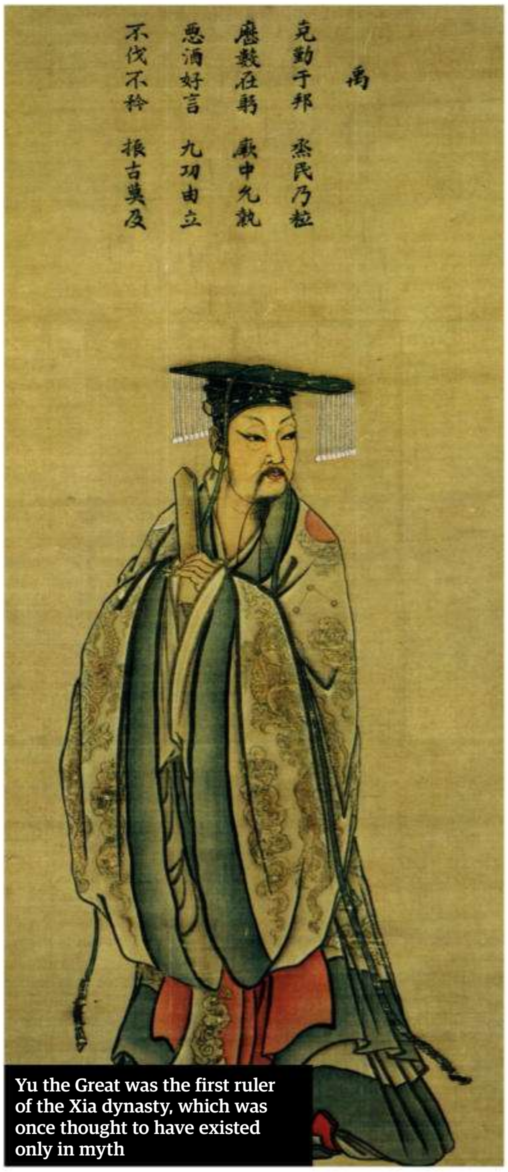
Under the Shang dynasty, the Silk Road began to spread Chinese goods further than ever, linking the country to the valuable trading ground of the Middle East and the great empires that could be found there. Even when the secret of its production began to seep out, Chinese silk held its prestige and as the vast country's wealth and power grew, ambitious would-be rulers began to rise power. Among the other powerful clans in China were the Zhou, who controlled territory in the Wei River valley. For decades they coexisted alongside the Shangs, who considered the Zhou little better than barbarians, but when the Shang king had their leader, Wen of Zhou, imprisoned in an effort to curb his popularity, it was the beginning of the end.

Following Wen's death his son, Wu of Zhou became convinced that he had been chosen by the gods to rule China. The popularity of the last Shang king, Di Xin, was at an all-time low and with his consort, Daji, he delighted in torture and sadism, revelling in debauchery as his people starved. His angry subjects turned to Wu of Zhou to help them overthrow the Shang kingdom and when Wu attacked, Di Xin's army defected to fight against their own king.

The brutal Battle of Muye ended with a decisive Zhou victory. Di Xin fled to his palace, where he swathed himself in priceless jewels before committing suicide by self-immolation whilst Wu put Daji to death. One of the new king's first acts was to throw open the doors of the grain store for the starving populace, who celebrated the end of the once popular Shang dynasty. In fact, the Zhou dynasty would rule China from 1046 BCE to 256 BCE.

Mindful that the Shang leader had been recognised as chosen by the divine judgment of the god, Shangti, the Zhou went one step forward and introduced the Mandate of Heaven. This decreed that the gods had selected one man to rule China and that, should he ever be overthrown, this was because the gods had found him wanting and personally selected a successor. The Mandate of Heaven legitimised the Zhou dynasty as a matter of divine intervention.

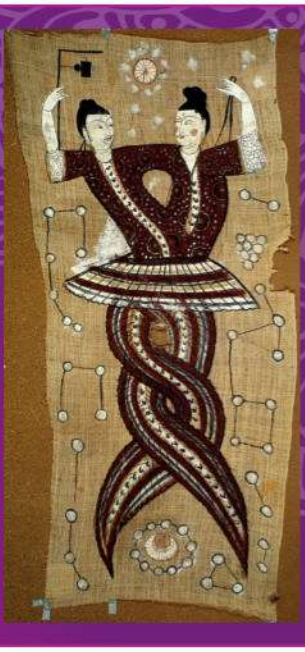
The Zhou moved their capital from Yin to Xi'an, from which they could expand into the Yangtze River valley. Under the Zhou, China's Iron Age


Yu the Great was the first ruler of the Xia dynasty, which was once thought to have existed only in myth

## The heroes of myth

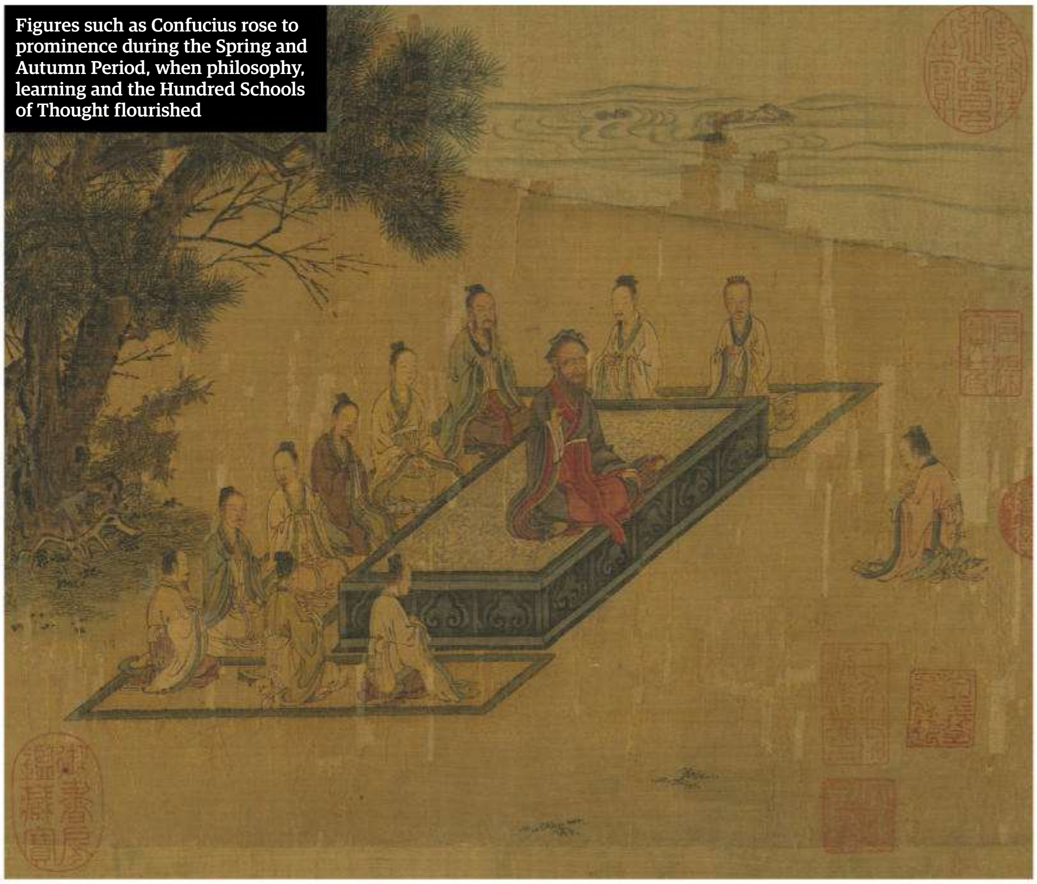
### Though now recognised as the first dynasty of ancient China, the Xia dynasty was once thought to have its basis in mythology

In fact, Chinese mythology is filled with tales of heroic beings who were sometimes human, sometimes deities and often a combination of the two. Among these mythological stories are characters such as Youchao, whose name translates as Have Nest, and who taught people who to make rudimentary shelters, or Suiren, the Fire-Maker, who taught them the secrets of fire and early methods of cooking. Youchao and Suiren appear in the stories of the Three August Ones and Five Emperors, mythological rulers who, legend has it, lived in ancient China in the 3rd century BCE. The August Ones were responsible for imparting essential skills and knowledge to the people of China, whilst the legendary emperors presided over a period of peace and harmony in which learning and medicine flourished and the secret of silk production was discovered. These eight men were held up as exemplars of leadership. They were wise, moral and dedicated to their country. It was a lesson that their historical successors were expected to follow.



began. The Silk Road flourished, though it still had yet to effectively reach the West, and the era became one of the most important that ancient China had ever seen. By this period, the Silk Road was carrying products besides silk back and forth, and among the textiles and treasures were people who carried only their ideas and philosophies. Yet even as such timeless figures as Sun-Tzu and Confucius emerged, China's wealth and territory made it a target for other empires who were looking to expand. The Zhou territory had been too small to raise an army and the Zhou Kings gathered their troops from surrounding territories, so when barbarians threatened them, they moved their capital ever further inland. Yet this reliance on other leaders made the weak points of the ruling dynasty all too plain and as lesser leaders offered their armies in the support of the Zhou cause, they were able to demand ever-increasing prices for doing so. Ultimately this unbalanced the kingdom and led to the development of mighty city states with their own rulers, who were more than able to challenge the Zhou.

With Zhou power fragmenting, China entered the so-called Spring and Autumn Period. The powerful city states went to war with each other, seeking to increase their influence and absorb smaller territories whilst the Zhou were distracted by the threat from outside invaders and China fell into civil war. Yet as the clans fought, trade still flourished and artists, merchants and anyone with a bit of ambition could travel from court to court and country to country, seeking their fortune along the Silk Road. The cultural face of China began to shift as people came from across the vast country and beyond to share ideas and philosophies, evidenced by the Hundred Schools of Thought that flourished during this period.



Figures such as Confucius rose to prominence during the Spring and Autumn Period, when philosophy, learning and the Hundred Schools of Thought flourished

During the Warring States Period, the armies of China's ruling families went to war in a devastating battle to claim dominance over the country

Image source: Zossolino (Wikipedia)

Meanwhile, outside China, bolts of silk became so valuable that they were used as tribute to other rulers, intended to display great wealth. Inside its boundaries, however, China was in turmoil. Outside of the palaces of the mighty, merchants even used silk to pay their taxes, whilst it was a more than welcome payment among the merchant classes. All of this jockeying for power led China into the Warring States Period of 476-221 BCE, in which seven elite states went to war against each other in an effort to unify the country and gain complete control. Though nominally still in power, Zhou influence had dwindled to virtually nothing by 256 BCE when the armies of the state of Qin killed the last Zhou monarch, King Nan. After centuries of war, it was hoped that China would now be divided by the three great states of Qin, Qi and Chu, but instead the bloodshed continued until Qin finally emerged victorious. In 221 BCE China was unified under the auspices of the Qin dynasty. Of course, this wasn't the end of the road for China's tangled history. Yet after centuries of bloodshed and battle, the people of China could be forgiven for hoping that it might be.

# The rise and fall of the Xiongnu

*When a confederation of nomadic peoples were brought together, they proved strength in numbers could pave the way for a truly dominant empire*

Written by David Crookes

**Occupying a region spanning the Eastern Asian Steppe (comprised of modern-day Mongolia, parts of northern China and ancient Central Asia), groups of nomadic tribesmen would spend much of their lives seeking water and pasture, leading horses, cows and sheep from one place to another while learning to hunt, ride and produce their daily essentials.**

More than that, however, they also proved themselves to be rather fierce warriors, picking up a strong – and lethal – feel for a bow and arrow from a very young age, and proving more than adept at using a spear or sword at close range. This stood them in good stead during battles against their neighbours on China's northern frontier as they sought grain, metal and silk during terrifying raids. By the 3rd century BCE, however, these separate far-flung groups began to form a dominant tribal confederation.

Such a move began in 209 BCE when Maodun – son of Touman, the supratribal leader of the Mongolian nomads – slowly but surely unified the various tribes. In doing so, he showed great determination, cunning and ruthlessness, not least because Touman had previously sought to overlook him as heir apparent, and promptly sent him as a hostage to a neighbouring tribe called the Yuezhi.

"The nomadic Xiongnu managed to dominate much of Central Asia for more than 500 years"

The idea was that Touman's warriors would attack the Yuezhi in the hope that Maodun's captors would retaliate and slaughter him. Instead, Maodun escaped by stealing a horse, prompting Touman to reward such bravery by making him commander of 10,000 horsemen.

As it turned out, that was a bad move on Touman's part. Maodun's warriors became very loyal, and after testing them by ordering the shooting of his favourite horse and the execution of his favourite wife, he then got them to shoot their arrows at his father. Those who subsequently failed to support him were also killed, but when the Qin dynasty looked to evict the Xiongnu from their pastures on the Yellow River in 215 BCE, the confederacy grew ever stronger. An empire was beginning to form.

Maodun brought order to the Xiongnu peoples, but it remained a curious and wholly admirable ancient civilisation in which women were not only treated the same as men, but stood with them as warriors. They were also in a position of some considerable strength, which, given the threats to them, was entirely understandable. They could amass 300,000 archers on horseback, which proved vital in reclaiming lost lands.

They also came to be a structured, hierarchal people. Maodun created three tiers, placing the nomadic supreme rulers (or Chanyu) at the top of the tree, and putting imperial governors and local tribal leaders below them. Interestingly, the Chanyu were not surrounded by pomp and ceremony, and their role was primarily to collect and distribute booty among tribes. What's more, according to Sima Qian, the Chinese historian of the early Han dynasty who was born some 100 years later, age played a large part in the civilisation's structure – and experience didn't count for much.

Young men, he said, would eat the richest and best food, and be feted for their strength and youth, while those older would consume the leftovers, since advanced age and weakness were qualities to be despised. Sima Qian revealed how everyone would eat the meat of domestic animals, however, and wear felt and fur wraps and hides, yet poor land meant they could not engage in agriculture so they would seek communities that could give them grain, fruit and animal feed.

For most of the time, the Xiongnu were peaceful – or, at the very least, they sought to offer peace when it best fit with their needs. Certainly, in the early years of Maodun's reign, which continued until 174 BCE, this multi-ethnic civilisation engaged in frequent battles – defeating the Yuezhi, absorbing tribes to the north of Inner Mongolia, and coming to occupy land that stretched from Lake Baikal to the north, the Liao River to the east and the Ordos Plateau to the south.

That said, their ethnic identify is not entirely known. Some suggest they were Mongolian, others claim Persian, and many say Turkic. What we do know, though, is that throughout this period, the Xiongnu continued to make the bulk of their money herding, although they also grew millet, barley and wheat as they took more agricultural lands under their belt and began to settle. They were also accomplished craftsmen, smelting iron and copper alloys, and creating ceramics, jewellery, tools and household utensils. It perhaps goes

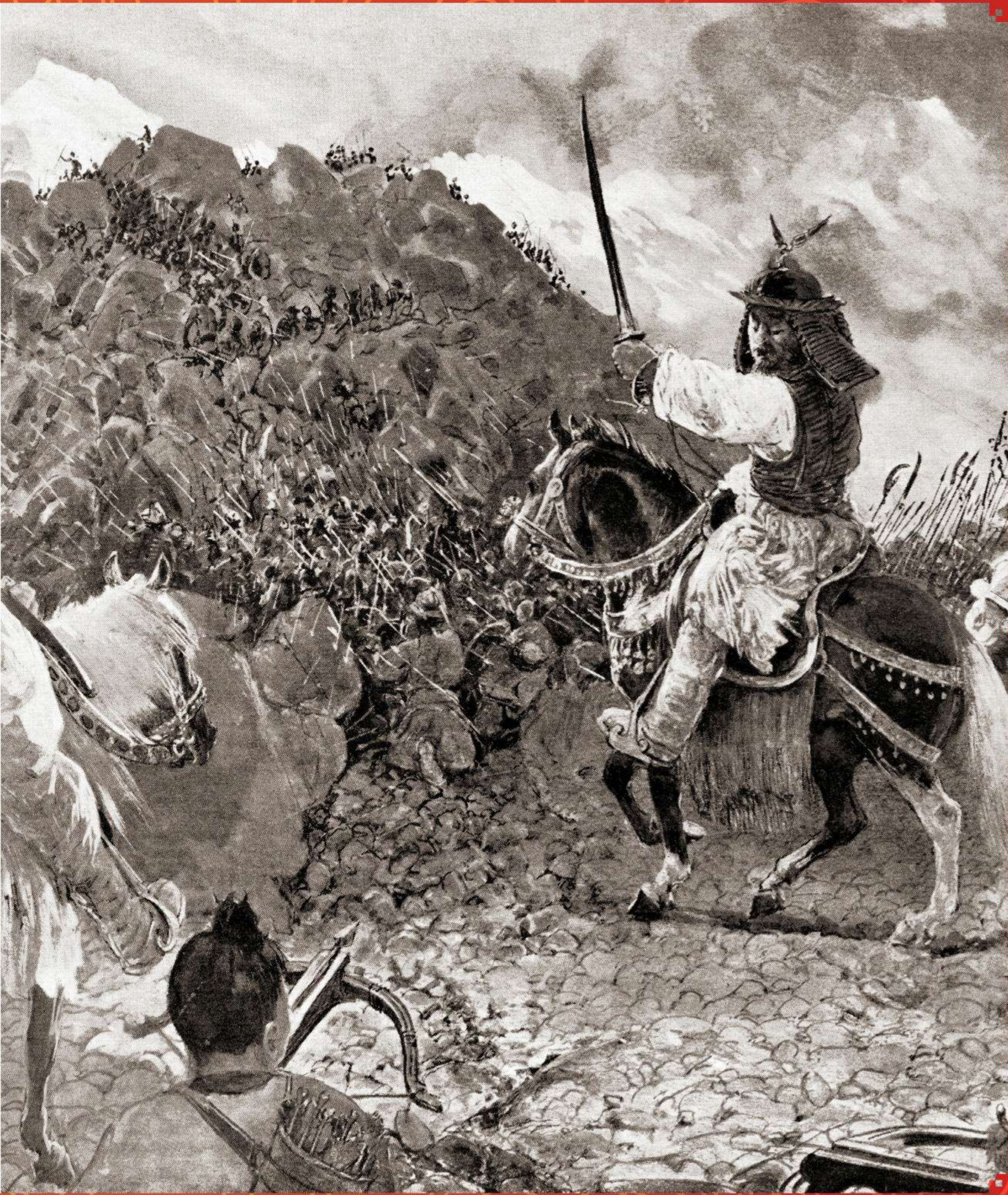
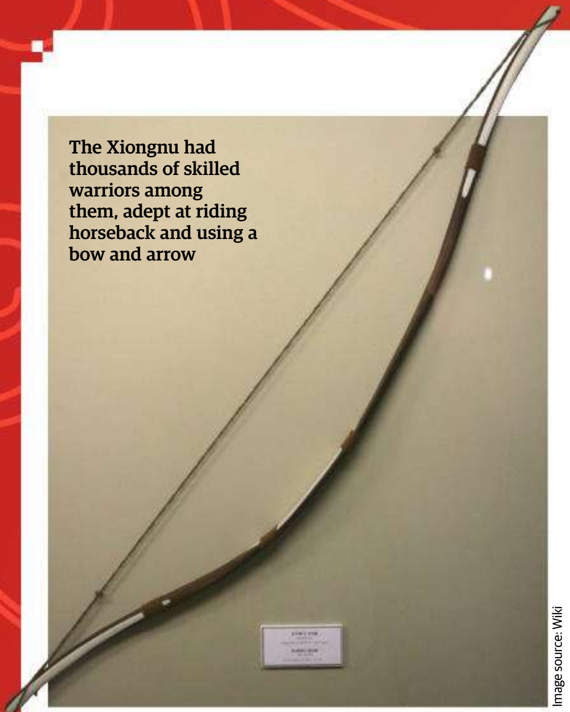


Image source: Alamy



The Xiongnu had thousands of skilled warriors among them, adept at riding horseback and using a bow and arrow

Image source: Wiki

# *The Xiongnu's warrior women*

## Ancient jewellery was recently found on remains dating back to the 1st century BCE

The Xiongnu people had access to great luxuries in life thanks to subsidies from the Han, which comprised of, at the very least, annual payments of silk, wine, grain and other foodstuffs. They also appear to have enjoyed such spoils in death too, for numerous tombs have not only uncovered evidence of animal sacrifices but examples of pottery, objects made of bronze, iron, gold, stone and bone, and some very eye-catching jewellery.

In 2017, the skeletons of female Xiongnu warriors were discovered in Siberia some 2,200 years after their deaths. They were buried with their belts, each made from coal and encrusted with semiprecious jade, coral, turquoise and carnelian. There were also pieces of bronze designed to be worn on the shoulder, as well as examples of engravings that depicted a horse – a symbolic animal. Images of goats pierced by arrows were present too.

According to expedition leader Dr Marina Kilunovskaya of the Institute for the History of Material Culture in Saint Petersburg, Russia, female belts were also made from bronze, carrying the images of bulls, camels, horses and snakes. She says that the decorations would have been worn on special occasions, such as weddings and, as in this case, funerals.

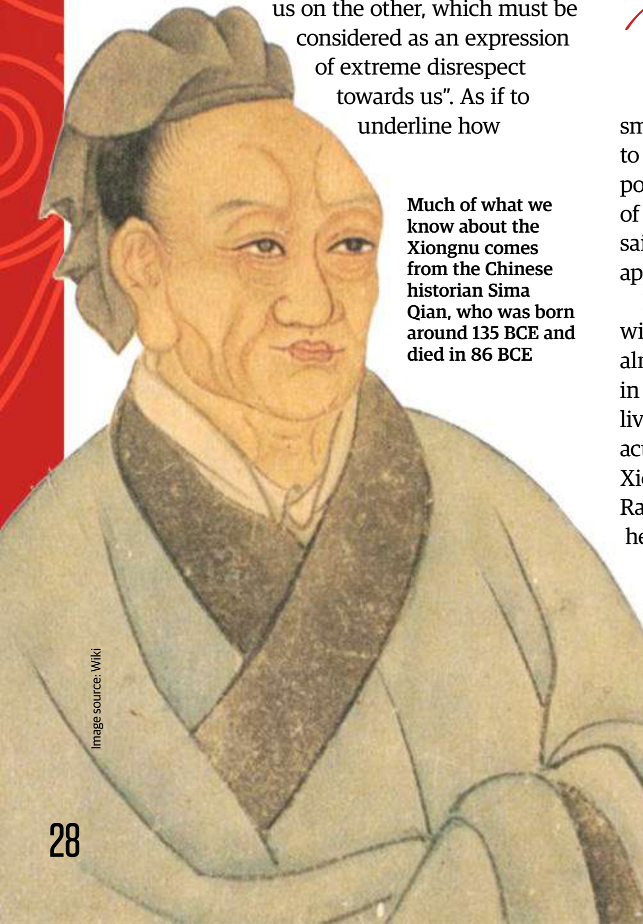
Image source: Wiki

without saying that they hand-manufactured their own weapons, too.

Such was their ferocity in using those weapons, the Chinese ended up striking deals in a bid to appease them, one of which saw the Xiongnu receiving silk, grain and wines each year as a way of lessening the threat to the Han Empire (the first Han emperor Gaozu had been captured in 201 BCE, and offering bribes had been a way of ensuring his release).

But such appeasement didn't always go down well. Jia Yi, a Han official, said the empire was wrong to give in to the demands, claiming that the Xiongnu were "arrogant and insolent on the one hand, and invade and plunder us on the other, which must be considered as an expression of extreme disrespect towards us". As if to underline how small in number the Xiongnu were in comparison to their Chinese neighbours, he said: "The population of the Xiongnu does not exceed that of a large Chinese district." The difference was said to be 60 million to 1.5 million, yet the Han appeasement of the Xiongnu continued.

> *"When the Xiongnu were defeated, they were replaced by the Xianbei, another nomadic tribal confederation"*



Much of what we know about the Xiongnu comes from the Chinese historian Sima Qian, who was born around 135 BCE and died in 86 BCE

Image source: Wiki

Indeed, when Maodun asked to marry Gaozu's widow, Empress Lü, in 192 BCE, he wrote, almost comedically, "I am a lonesome ruler born in marshes and raised in plains populated by livestock." There was no way an offended Lü could act on her immediate instinct to exterminate the Xiongnu, since Maodun's army was too powerful. Rather, she avoided the proposal by referring to herself as "old and frail", said she was "losing hair and teeth", and urged Maodun not to "defile" himself. Han princesses were married to Xiongnu chieftains, however.

But then, it was not unusual for men to have more than one wife. Note that Maodun had had his favourite wife killed, pointing to the fact that he had others. Such a situation was not confined to those in power within Xiongnu society, either. Any man could have multiple wives, and they sought to keep marriage in the family: if a man died, his widows would marry his younger brothers or any son they had not themselves given birth to. It would be worse if a great chief died, though. In such cases, the wives could end up slaughtered and laid to rest alongside him.

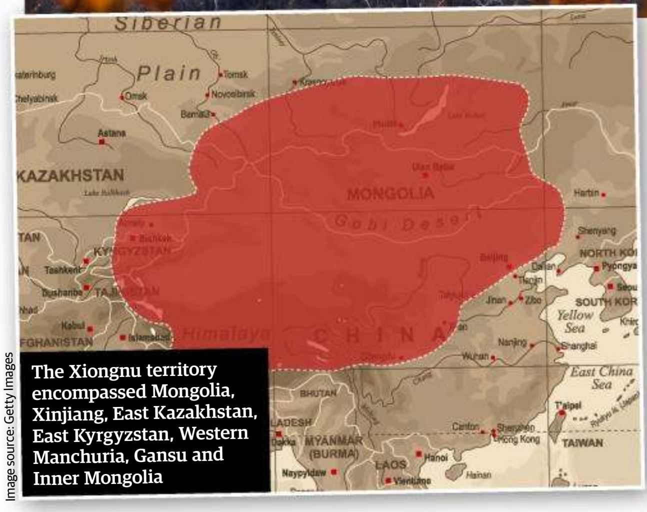
Indeed, sacrifices and ceremony were important to the Xiongnu. The blood of sacrificed white horses was drunk in special ceremonies, since such animals were held in high esteem as a symbol of battle, transport and life. The Xiongnu

A bronze seal handed to a Xiongnu chief by the Eastern Han dynasty, which says: "To Han obedient, friendly and loyal chief of Xiongnu"

Image source: Wiki

New walls were built to protect the Qin dynasty from the Xiongnu people in the north, and this was expanded to the Great Wall of China that we see today

Image source: Getty Images


Siberian Plain
Omsk
Tomsk
Novosibirsk
Barnaul
Astana
KAZAKHSTAN
MONGOLIA
Ulan Bator
Gobi Desert
Harbin
Shenyang
Beijing
Dalian
Tashkent
KYRGYZSTAN
Bishkek
Dushanbe
TAJIKISTAN
Kabul
Islamabad
Himalaya
CHINA
Jinan
Nanjing
Wuhan
Shanghai
Yellow Sea
East China Sea
Taipei
TAIWAN
BHUTAN
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Naypyidaw
LAOS
Vientiane
Hanoi
Canton
Hong Kong
Hainan

The Xiongnu territory encompassed Mongolia, Xinjiang, East Kazakhstan, East Kyrgyzstan, Western Manchuria, Gansu and Inner Mongolia

Image source: Getty Images

also worshipped the Sun and the Moon while revering Heaven, Earth and their ancestors, although such activities were not entirely unusual, and the Chinese would do the same. In that sense, they were following the Central Asian religion of Tengrism in which Heaven, Earth, spirits of nature and ancestors each provide for and protect humans. Even so, despite some overlaps in culture and outlook, the Han dynasty treated the Xiongnu with disdain, and yet they ended up rubbing alongside them for 250 years.

During that time, suspicion and apprehension was such that the Xiongnu's barbarian activities prompted the Chinese to build walls (China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, joined together small walls in the late 3rd century BCE to position his empire against those in the north, and they were subsequently expanded into the Great Wall). For a people who had never lived in walled cities, such barriers may have felt novel (we can't know for certain since there are no written records on the side of the Xiongnu), but it mainly shows how the two sides struggled to get along.

As if to underline this, the Xiongnu made life difficult for the Han dynasty during the creation of the Silk Road trade routes, and the Han-Xiongnu War between 133 BCE and 89 CE proved bloody. What's more, the Han dynasty, which ruled between 206 BCE and 220 CE, succeeded in taking land to the east and seizing vast swathes of the north by 104 BCE, leading to a loss of men and animals, and swung the balance of power away from the Xiongnu.

Further losses and gains would also come, but it was famine, plague and revolts that had a major impact on the Xiongnu between 44 and 46 CE. Eventually, there was a split into northern and southern Xiongnu as confederation tribes began to fall under Chinese command. From that point, power really did ebb away. The Xianbei crushed the north in 155 CE, and the south submitted to tributary relations with the Han. Yet there is no doubt the Xiongnu had made their mark as a once-great empire of tribes. Their effect on China, meanwhile, reverberates to the present day.

This statue is called 'Horse Stepping on a Xiongnu Soldier', and displays the might of the Western Han dynasty

Image source: Alamy

# Secrets of the Soviet sands

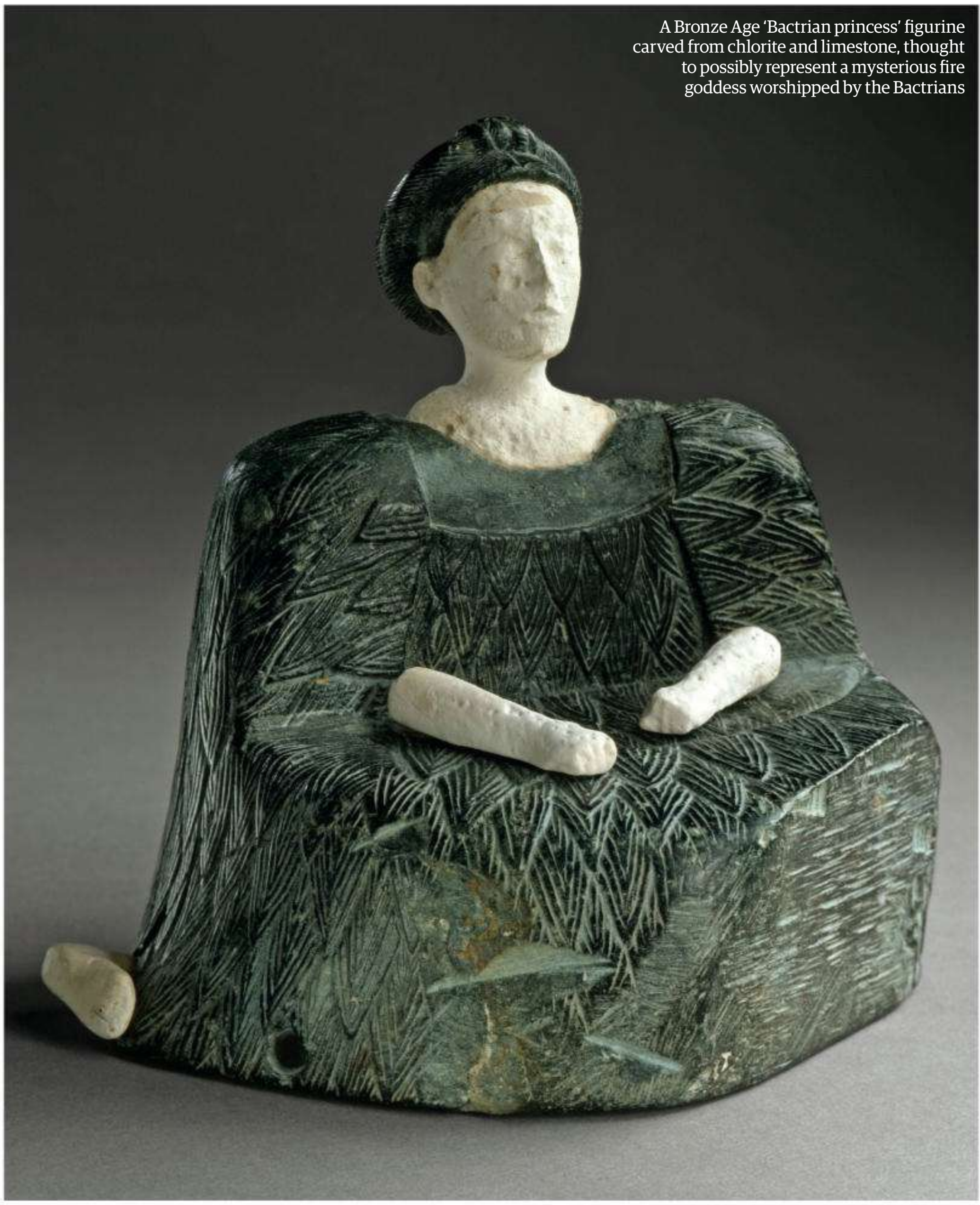
*In the 1970s, an archaeologist from the USSR discovered the historical record of a Bronze Age civilisation in the Central Asian desert. Only the fall of the Iron Curtain would reveal his research to the wider world*

Written by April Madden

**History is full of surprises. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980s, the wider world was able to discover the work of Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi, a Russo-Greek archaeologist from the Uzbek city of Tashkent. His research, hidden behind the Iron Curtain since the 1970s and eventually translated in the 1990s, revealed something startling: a largely unknown Bronze Age culture in Central Asia, with links to the civilisations of the Indus Valley, the cultures of the Iranian Plateau and Persian Gulf, and those of the Eurasian steppes.**

The crossroads of Central Asia sits somewhere amid the dark sands of the Karakum Desert. The Karakum is a shifting, ever-expanding place; windborne particles of it have been found in locations as far apart as Antarctica and Greenland. The Silk Road once wove its way through the desert, past the "perfect lands" of the oasis city Merv (now Mary, Turkmenistan), and the glittering river city Āmul (now Türkmenabat). The Amu Darya river that runs along the northeastern edge of the desert is named for this ancient city, although in classical writings it's more commonly referred to as the Oxus. The lands beyond it were known to the Romans as Transoxania, to the Arabs as Mā Warā an-Nahr, and to the Persians as Farârud – names that all translate to 'Beyond the [Oxus] river'. To the ancient Iranians the land beyond the river was Turan, a semi-legendary

> "The Bronze Age people of this region were settled, urbane, technically adept"



A Bronze Age 'Bactrian princess' figurine carved from chlorite and limestone, thought to possibly represent a mysterious fire goddess worshipped by the Bactrians

Image source: Wiki

## Ancient Silk Road cities

Set like a jewel amid the irrigated fields that fed its large population, the outlines of the town that Sarianidi called Margush and theorised was the capital of the BMAC can still be seen at the site of Gonur Tepe in Turkmenistan. Fortified behind walls and dominated by a 'qila' citadel (the word is Persian for 'fort', and the buildings are common to ancient Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, India, Pakistan and parts of Israel), this proto-city could have supported a population of thousands. Its streets were lined with adobe mudbrick houses, each containing several comfortable, spacious rooms apiece – the inhabitants certainly weren't crowded into low-quality, small homes. They had a water supply fed by a reservoir and not one but two sewage systems – Sarianidi theorised that one was for regular use and one solely for religious ritual ablutions, although this has been disputed by some Zoroastrian scholars. They have also disputed Sarianidi's assertion that he discovered a vast (he described it as "cathedral-sized") Zoroastrian fire temple at the site, within which were jars and other vessels containing traces of cannabis, opium and ephedra, now thought to be the components of an ancient drug mentioned in the Hindu Rigveda as 'soma' and in the Zoroastrian Avesta as 'haoma'. The site may well have been dedicated to an even earlier Indo-Iranian fire deity instead.

The Bronze Age ruins at Gonur Tepe, Turkmenistan. Sarianidi believed that this large, fortified site was the capital of the BMAC civilisation

Image source: Wiki © David Stanley

warrior-realm that is mentioned in the great Persian epic *Shanameh*.

In the 19th and early 20th century, Turan became a problematic concept. Traditionally the Turanians had been conceptualised as the 'opposite' of the Aryans – the name that the people of ancient Iran had given to themselves in their oldest Avestan-language scriptures. To them, the Turanians were outsiders and apostates, the dark to their light: they may not have followed the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, despite the legend that Zoroaster was from the lands beyond the river. Sarianidi certainly believed that his finds supported this hypothesis, asserting that the region was "the native land of the Zoroastrians and, probably, of Zoroaster himself".

Deliberate misinterpretation of Indo-Aryan texts by Arthur de Gobineau, a 19th-century French aristocrat and advocate of racism, eventually resulted in the incorrect idea of the blonde, blue-eyed Aryan 'master race' that Nazi Germany found so beguiling. The Turanian opposite of the Aryan was, therefore, in the words of one misguided mid-19th century racial anthropologist, "not inherently a savage, but he is radically a barbarian. He does not live from hand to mouth, like a beast, but neither has he in full measure the moral and intellectual endowments of the true man". It wasn't until Sarianidi's discoveries were revealed to the post-USSR West that the world realised that his research "proved that the Amu Darya (Oxus River) valley in Central Asia constitutes a fourth point of origin of urban civilisation, along with the Nile, Indus, and Tigris-Euphrates valleys". (Sarianidi later updated his statement to acknowledge that China was another cradle of civilisation, too.)

Sarianidi's research demonstrated that, far from being the mysterious, barbarous and backward

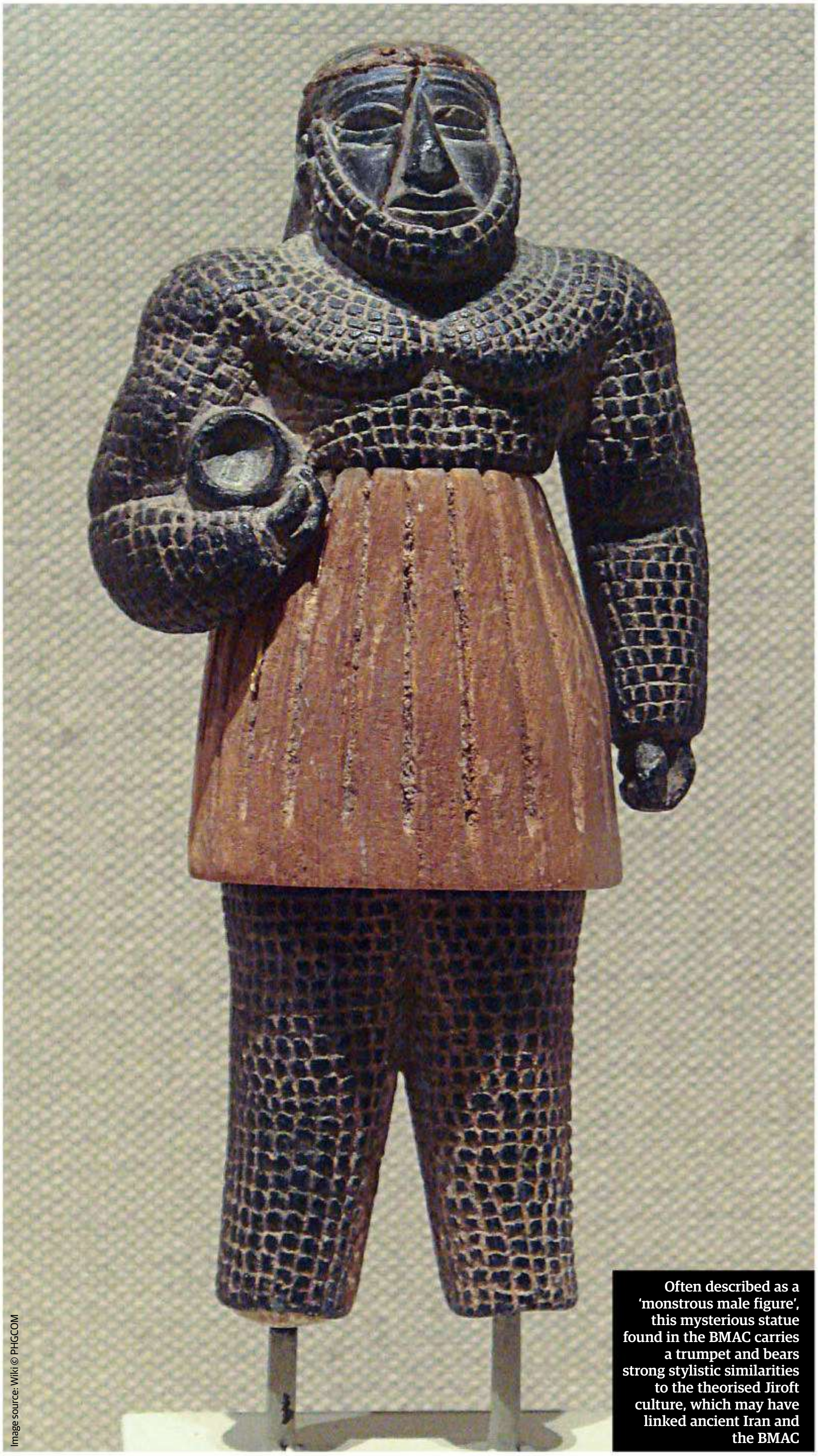


Image source: Wiki © PHGCOM

Often described as a 'monstrous male figure', this mysterious statue found in the BMAC carries a trumpet and bears strong stylistic similarities to the theorised Jiroft culture, which may have linked ancient Iran and the BMAC

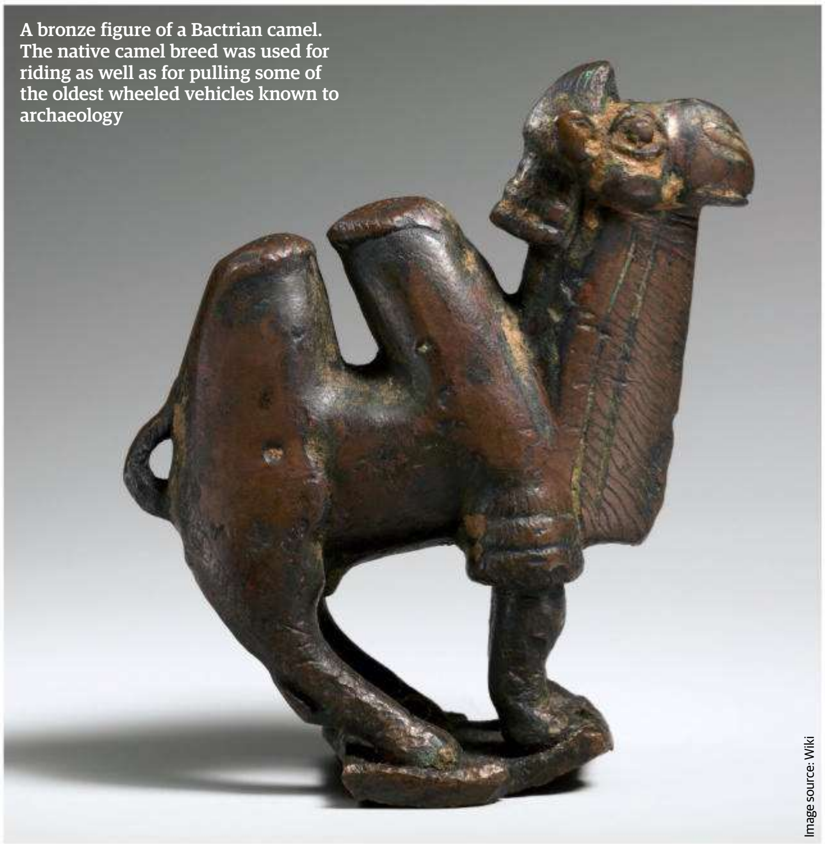
> *"Many classical and medieval writers describe the area in terms of its lush greenness"*

nomadic society of legend, the Bronze Age people of this region were settled, urbane, technically adept, cultured and diplomatic. Artefacts found in the region and in the homelands of its trading partners point to Bronze Age commercial relationships with similar civilisations in Iran, India and the Eurasian steppes, including Elam and Harappa. Archaeological remains denote palaces or temples and other monumental architecture; material-culture finds include religious idols, jewellery, tools, fine metalwork, wheel-turned ceramics, and even a small stone seal with Chinese-style characters on it, a tantalising hint at the possibility of a written script. As archaeologists patiently persuaded the dusty Karakum to give up its secrets, Sarianidi dubbed the sites that riddle the black earth beneath the sands the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC).

The river valley and the desert's string of oases made the BMAC an ideal path along what would later become the Silk Road, the vast trading route between Asia, Africa, the Levant and Europe, and even during the late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age the Bactrians grew rich on passing trade. Sarianidi theorised that the route that would eventually become the Silk Road was, in the Bronze Age, the main artery of the lapis lazuli trade. The semi-precious blue stone was abundant in Central Asia – it's been mined in Afghanistan since the 7th millennium BCE – and was hugely popular with the Bronze Age Mesopotamians, ancient Egyptians, and the civilisations of the Indus Valley and the Caucasian steppes.

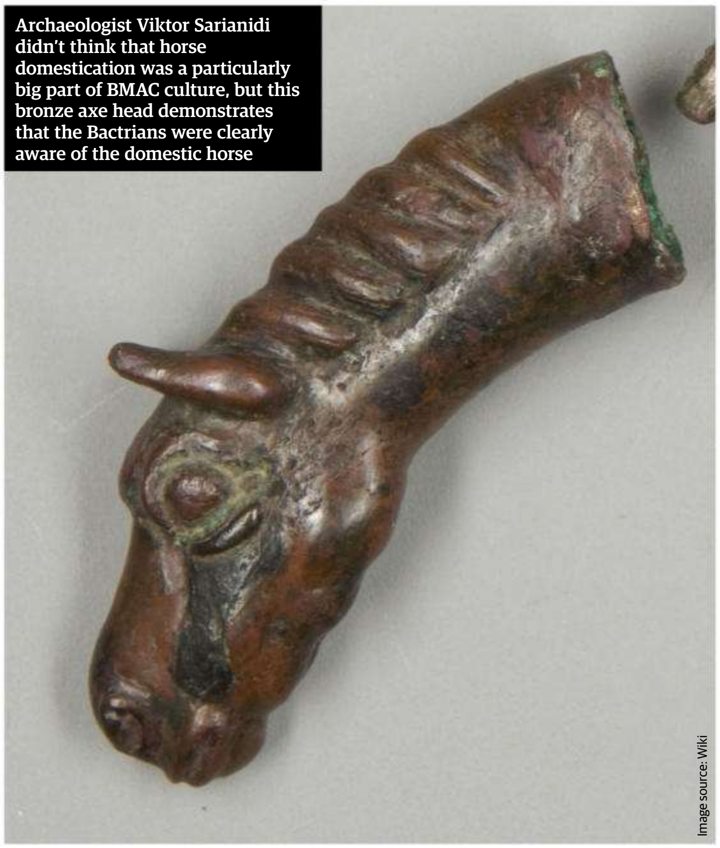
The Bactrians lived along and controlled a significant part of the trading route, and picked up innovations from travellers through their territory. The earliest known use of irrigation was in 6th-millennium-BCE Iran, but by the height of the BMAC the agricultural technique had travelled far enough down the lapis lazuli route to make the desert bloom; many classical and medieval writers describe the area in terms of its lush greenness and fertile soil. Nearly three millennia later, the 10th-century Iranian author Istakhri could still write of Transoxanian Samarkand: "In it are the best trees and fruits, in every home are gardens, cisterns and flowing water."

Initially the Bronze Age people of the BMAC grew wheat, fruit trees, grapes and barley; they tamed the ox, two breeds of sheep, and a particular breed of pig first domesticated in



A bronze figure of a Bactrian camel. The native camel breed was used for riding as well as for pulling some of the oldest wheeled vehicles known to archaeology

Image source: Wiki



Archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi didn't think that horse domestication was a particularly big part of BMAC culture, but this bronze axe head demonstrates that the Bactrians were clearly aware of the domestic horse

Image source: Wiki

southeast Asia, suggesting that the initial stock animals were brought there deliberately. Other domesticated animals soon followed: another breed of sheep, goats, the native Bactrian camels (who pulled carts), possibly even the odd horse or two thanks to the Bactrians' trade links with the Sintashta and Andronova cultures of the steppes (although no evidence has been found for horses being a major part of their Bronze Age culture), and dogs. Much later, a grisly assertion by the Greek philosopher Strabo, himself born in Asia Minor, claimed that the Bactrians bred a certain type of dog that they dubbed "undertakers", whose role was to hunt and consume the elderly and infirm, who were cast out of Bactrian society. In his *Geographica*, Strabo claims to have been told that the towns of the Bactrians looked neat and clean from the outside, but within the walls the streets between the mud-brick houses rattled with the gnawed bones of the dogs' victims. He claimed that Alexander the Great put a stop to the practice, but no evidence of this bizarre ancient urban legend has ever been found.

What have been found are figures called 'Bactrian princesses'. Again, the Macedonian conqueror probably had an inadvertent role in their naming, which later historians may well have based on Alexander's wife Roxana, perhaps the world's most famous Bactrian princess. These Bronze Age female figures however, made of stone and clay and around the size of a child's doll, wearing elaborately stylised robes and headdresses that merge with their hair, are thought to represent an ancient pagan goddess. The most likely candidate is a putative ancient Proto-Indo-Iranian fire goddess, echoes of whom are thought to survive in the Hindu goddess of the southern Sun, Tapati, the Scythian hearthfire goddess Tabiti (whom Greek historian Herodotus equated with the Greek hearth goddess Hestia), and the Avestan word 'tapaiti' ('it burns'). It's even possible that some of the fire temple sites found in the BMAC pre-date the Zoroastrian religion that they're traditionally associated with, and were originally dedicated to this mysterious fire goddess instead. Indeed, a clash of similar beliefs and practises, embodied by different deities for different, geographically separated peoples, would certainly explain the traditional enmity between the Zoroastrian Iranians and the possibly pagan Bactrians. The sculptures could have been folkloric in nature rather than religious – there's evidence that some Bactrians practised more well-known religions, particularly early Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism – but the princess figurines are often found within special rooms inside dwellings, which suggest that they were venerated in household shrines.

Whoever the gods of the Bactrians were, this wealthy, well-connected, hi-tech Bronze Age culture must have thought that they had plenty to thank them for. Their proto-cities were tidy and safe, their farms plentiful, their lives enriched by labour-saving devices, their coffers rich from passing trade, their storehouses replete with grain and wine, and their mysterious religious rites fuelled by a heady brew of cannabis, opium and ephedra. Now that Viktor Sarianidi's discovery has come out from behind the Iron Curtain, we can look forward to many more discoveries about their fascinating lives and culture.

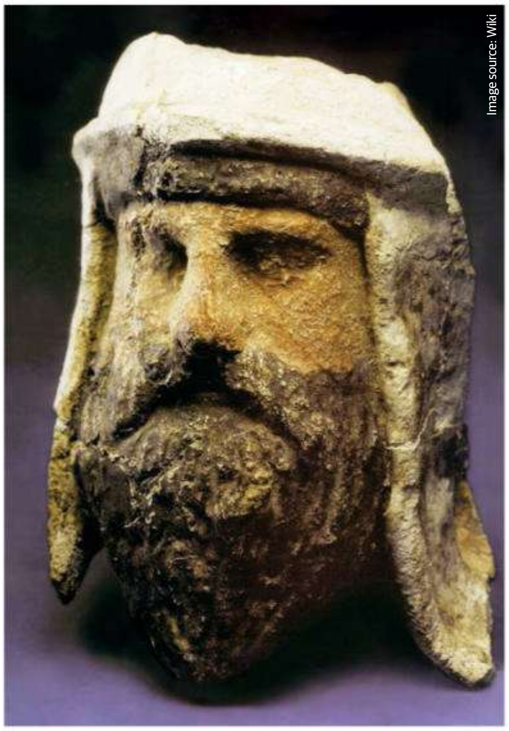
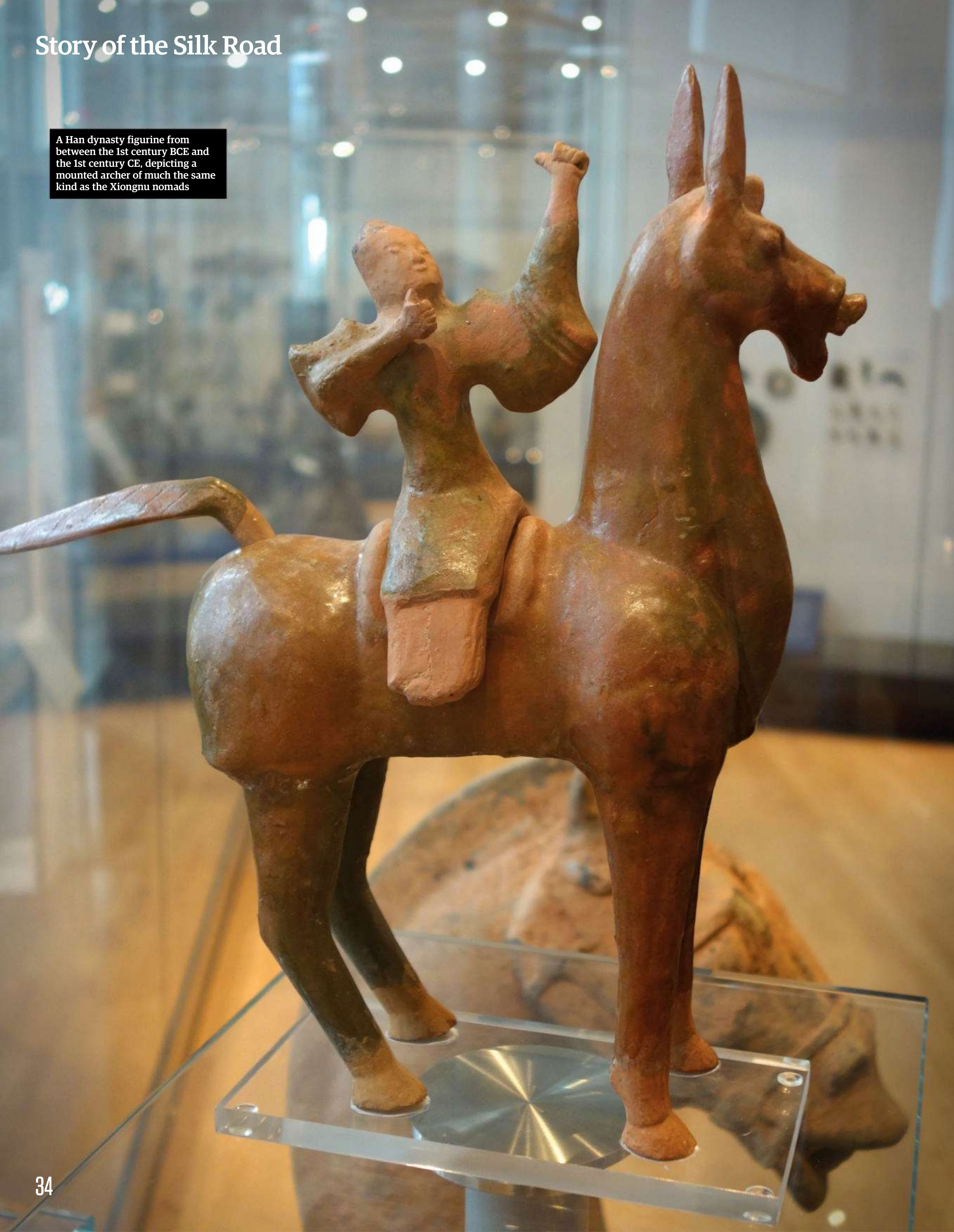


Image source: Wiki

This sculpture is thought to represent a particular type of Zoroastrian cleric known as a mobad, who could officiate over religious services. His headdress is distinctively Bactrian



A Han dynasty figurine from between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, depicting a mounted archer of much the same kind as the Xiongnu nomads

# The Heavenly Horses of Dayuan

*Han China's knowledge of Central Asia expanded as a result of the missions of the dauntless explorer Zhang Qian, and sparked a war against a distant Central Asian state in Ferghana for possession of its 'Heavenly Horses'*

Written by Marc DeSantis

**China was unified under a single ruler in 221 BCE by Qin Shi Huang, the country's first emperor and the founder of the brief, but highly influential, Qin dynasty.** Upon that dynasty's dissolution in the late 3rd century BCE, China was engulfed by turmoil that only ended with the accession of a former official of the Qin government, Liu Bang, to the vacant imperial throne. Taking the regnal name of Gaozu, he inaugurated the succeeding Han dynasty, and became China's new 'Son of Heaven.'

China, known to its inhabitants as the 'Middle Kingdom' because of its central position in East Asia, would experience a golden age of economic growth and cultural flowering under the Han. China's political control would be extended far westward into Central Asia, with its armies bringing the oasis states of the Tarim Basin, important trading states on the eastern end of the Silk Road, under Chinese suzerainty.

The gravest threat to Chinese security during the time of the early Han dynasty, in the second century BCE, came from the fierce Xiongnu, a confederation of nomadic tribes that roamed the Mongolian steppe north of China's lengthy and hard-to-defend frontier. The Xiongnu were expert cavalrymen, riding their tough, shaggy steppe ponies into battle, delivering death from afar with arrows sped from their compact and powerful composite bows. Relations with the Xiongnu were not altogether hostile, as trade relations between them and the Chinese were extensive. Among the most eagerly sought-after trade items for the Han were horses, of which they never seemed to have enough, but the Xiongnu possessed in abundance. Such was the military capacity of the nomads, however, that the Han always had to be on their guard for an eruption from the steppe. The Xiongnu were ever-watchful for any sign of Chinese weakness, and had happily ransacked northern China following the disintegration of Qin control in the latter third century BCE. Emperor Gaozu himself had been trapped by a Xiongnu army after chasing the invaders out onto the steppe. At no time was such an enemy to be taken lightly. One emperor who wanted to gain the upper hand over the nomads was Wudi, which means 'Martial Emperor' in Chinese. He was one of the greatest conquerors of Chinese history, and he wished to find allies against the Xiongnu. He decided that a diplomatic mission to the far west, into what is today Central Asia, must be undertaken, to outflank his steppe opponents.

Sima Qian, Wudi's court historian, relates in his *Shiji* – 'Historical Records' – that in 139 BCE an emissary named Zhang Qian was sent west by the emperor to locate the nomadic Yuezhi tribe, known to the Indians as the Kushan and the Greeks as the Tocharians. These people were the hereditary enemies of the Xiongnu. Captured Xiongnu had told the Chinese that the king of the Yuezhi had been killed by the Xiongnu, and his skull turned into a drinking cup. Surely they would be interested in obtaining vengeance against the Xiongnu, Wudi's thinking went.

Zhang began his journey at Longxi, in China's far west, taking with him Ganfu, his personal Xiongnu slave, and a party of around 100 other men. Zhang would traverse the deserts of Xinjiang, including the Taklamakan, pass over the Pamir Mountains, and ultimately make his way to the remote Jaxartes (Syr Darya) and (Oxus) Amu Darya Rivers in Central Asia. Before Zhang could reach his destination, however, the Xiongnu captured him, and held him captive for more than ten years.

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Zhang at last escaped, with Ganfu, and attempted to complete his much-delayed mission. After about a month's travel, he came upon the land of Dayuan, or Great Yuan, in the Ferghana valley, which lies in portions of modern Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As recorded by Sima Qian in the *Shiji*, Zhang found that the men of the regions that he passed through 'all have deep-set eyes and profuse beards and whiskers.' They were thus Caucasian peoples, likely Indo-European peoples such as the Scythians or even Greeks. Indeed, Dayuan, the name that Zhang gave for them, may conceivably denote 'Great Ionians,' in

## Xiongnu: Warriors of the steppe

### One of China's greatest foes were an especially fearsome tribe

Wudi was fully justified in wanting to find new allies against the dreaded Xiongnu. The latter were longstanding enemies of the Chinese, who had built the first of the defences known today as the Great Wall to keep them out of China. The attractions of China to such people, with its warm and rich plains, are easy to fathom. The steppe of ancient eastern Eurasia where the Xiongnu made their home was very cold, and covered by snow and ice in wintertime.

The Xiongnu were a confederation of tribes. They recognised one man as their paramount leader, the shanyu, who was analogous to one of the nomad khans of the subsequent Middle Ages. They relied very heavily on their hardy steppe horses, which granted them a high degree of mobility. This mobility made them fearsome opponents for the Chinese, who traditionally fielded slower, infantry-based armies. "They shift from place to place as swiftly as a flock of birds, so that it is extremely difficult to corner them and bring them under control," warned one Han imperial minister.

Tactically, the Xiongnu were typical of the steppe nomads that roamed across Eurasia for millennia. The primary weapon of the Xiongnu was the composite bow, a deadly weapon in the hands of a Xiongnu horse archer who had used it from childhood. When launched en masse their arrows fell like a lethal rain.

Their horse archers would swarm an enemy, delivering death, and then retreat swiftly to avoid reprisals. One oft-used tactic was that of the 'feigned flight,' in which a group of Xiongnu would deliberately run away, pretending to be fleeing, fully intending to convince their gullible foes that they were running away out of fear. Once the enemy had given chase, and become strung out, the Xiongnu would wheel about and pounce upon their now-vulnerable pursuers.

The Xiongnu would remain a danger to China until they were crushed by the Xianbei, another steppe nomad group, in the second century CE. Today, some believe that the Xiongnu are the ancestors of the infamous Huns, another nomadic people famous for their cavalry, who invaded the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries CE.

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which case they may have been the descendants of demobilised Greek soldiers settled there by Alexander the Great some two centuries before.

The capital of Dayuan is given by Sima Qian as Ershi, which may potentially be identified with the modern Khujand in Tajikistan, a city that was founded by Alexander the Great in 329 BCE. Dayuan's king was interested in opening trading relations with China, Zhang discovered. He was next directed to the land of Kangju (Sogdia) and thence to the Yuezhi homeland, which lay north of the Oxus River, but upon his arrival, Sima Qian states, Zhang found that the new king, successor to his slain father, had no interest in either taking vengeance against the Xiongnu on the other side of the Pamirs or in an alliance with China. Zhang next travelled to 'Daxia' (Bactria).

Zhang remained in the region for about a year. Despite his earnest diplomacy, he had no success in interesting the Yuezhi in combining with the Han to form an anti-Xiongnu coalition. He began his return journey to China, with a severely depleted party. More bad luck was to come. On his way home, he was again taken captive by the Xiongnu, and was held captive for another year before he and Ganfu could escape and reach Chang'an (modern Xi'an), China's imperial capital.

The Han dynasty-era bronze sculpture known as the 'Flying Horse of Gansu' may depict one of the legendary 'Heavenly Horses' brought to China from the far west in the late second century BCE

Image source: G41rn8 (Wikipedia)

Zhang told the Martial Emperor of the land of Dayuan, that it lay some 3,000 miles to the west where the people lived in cities, as did the Chinese, and that its inhabitants cultivated wheat, rice and grapes, the last of which they turned into wine. Of enormous interest to Wudi was Zhang Qian's report on Dayuan's superb horses. Zhang claimed that these were 'Heavenly Horses' that 'sweat blood.' It is now theorised by modern science that the bloody sweat was caused by the activity of parasites that created weeping sores in the horses' skin.

Wudi, being a superstitious man, had in the past consulted a divinatory text that had prophesied that 'supernatural horses' would arrive from the northwest, which was, roughly, the direction of Dayuan, so its location seemed to coincide well with Chinese belief. It was also thought that Heavenly Horses were capable of flight, and that the emperor would be borne up to Heaven by them at his death. Wudi thus had an enormous incentive for laying his hands on these animals, much beyond the very practical desire to improve the quality of his cavalry mounts.

In addition to Dayuan and Daxia/Bactria, Zhang Qian related information to the court concerning the lands of Kangju (Sogdia), Anxi (Parthia), and Shendu (India), among others. He also noted that Chinese wares were already available in the Bactrian bazaars, and that these had been carried westward from Shendu/India, which suggested to him that India lay relatively closer to China.

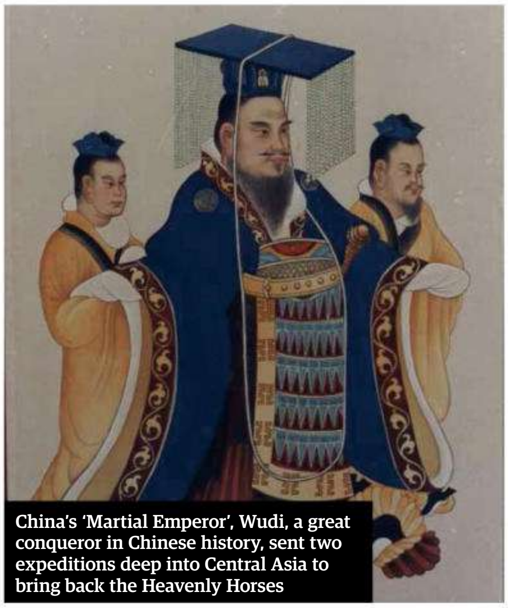
Trade increased between the Chinese and the peoples of Central Asia, and the Han also sought to strengthen their hold on the territory leading into the interior, the Gansu Corridor, which became the eastern segment of the Silk Road, building forts there. Wudi was also able to obtain through diplomacy some outstanding horses from the Wusun nomads, but these were not the equal of the Heavenly Horses that he so craved.

Around 107 BCE, Wudi sent emissaries to Dayuan at their capital of Ershi in Ferghana to purchase these Heavenly Horses, but was rebuffed. The 1,000 gold pieces and the horse statue of solid gold that Wudi had sent to pay for them did not impress the Dayuan. They also took sour note of the poor condition in which embassies from the Han arrived at Ershi, with visitors often bedraggled and hungry. The Dayuan were unwilling to part with their animals, seeing them as being among their most valuable national treasures.

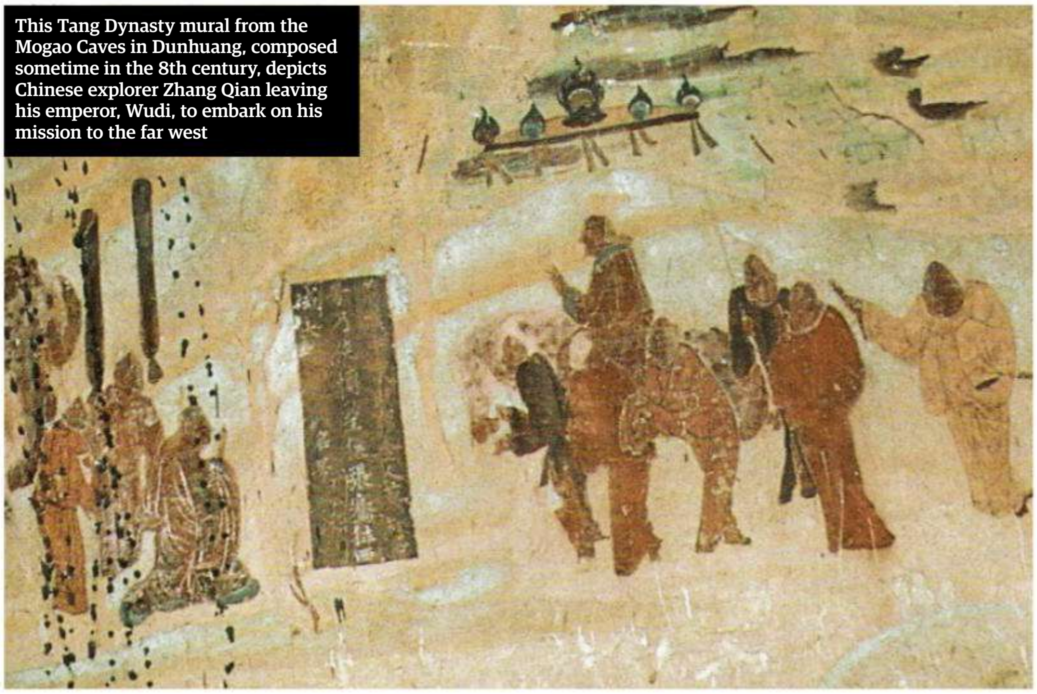
The Han emissaries were infuriated by the refusal, cursing the Dayuan, and then they took a mallet to the gold horse, destroying it. These actions outraged the Dayuan, who sent word ahead to the people of the neighbouring city of Yucheng, whose land the envoys would have to pass through, to kill them, and take their things.

The murder of his ambassadors incensed Wudi, and he sought revenge. He ordered a punitive expedition formed, and appointed Li Guangli as 'Ershi General' – Ershi, as the capital of Dayuan, was to be his target, where he would also lay hands on the incomparable Heavenly Horses – and gave him 6,000 cavalry and between 20,000 and 30,000 'young men of bad reputation', as Sima Qian describes them – to fight on foot.

Accompanying Li Guangli as part of his staff were his second-in-command, Li Che; Zhao Shicheng, his overseer of martial law; and Wang Hui, the expedition's guide. Departing China in 104 BCE, the expeditionary army made its way by the Lop Nor in Xinjiang. Moving westward, the small oasis cities the Chinese encountered in the Tarim Basin became frightened of them, and closed their gates against the Han army. The Chinese could not persuade them to give them food, so Li Guangli's army was therefore both tired and famished before it ever reached Dayuan.



China's 'Martial Emperor', Wudi, a great conqueror in Chinese history, sent two expeditions deep into Central Asia to bring back the Heavenly Horses



This Tang Dynasty mural from the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, composed sometime in the 8th century, depicts Chinese explorer Zhang Qian leaving his emperor, Wudi, to embark on his mission to the far west

Coming upon Yucheng, Li's army mounted an assault on the city, but this failed miserably. After holding a conference with Li Che and Zhao Shicheng, Li Guangli realised that if he could not carry Yucheng with the inadequate force at his disposal, he had no chance of capturing Ershi. He turned his army around and headed back east, having lost close to 90 per cent of his original martial strength.

In Chang'an, Wudi was not pleased to receive Li Guangli's message that he had aborted the mission. Li had also requested a bigger army to get the job done against Dayuan, but Wudi instead ordered the Jade Gate Pass, on China's western frontier, shut, and also warned that any soldier of Li's defeated army who tried to re-enter China would be executed. A frightened Li parked his army at Dunhuang, in modern Gansu province, and waited.

> "If the Han stopped their attacks, the Dayuan would come out with their horses and allow them to have their pick of them"

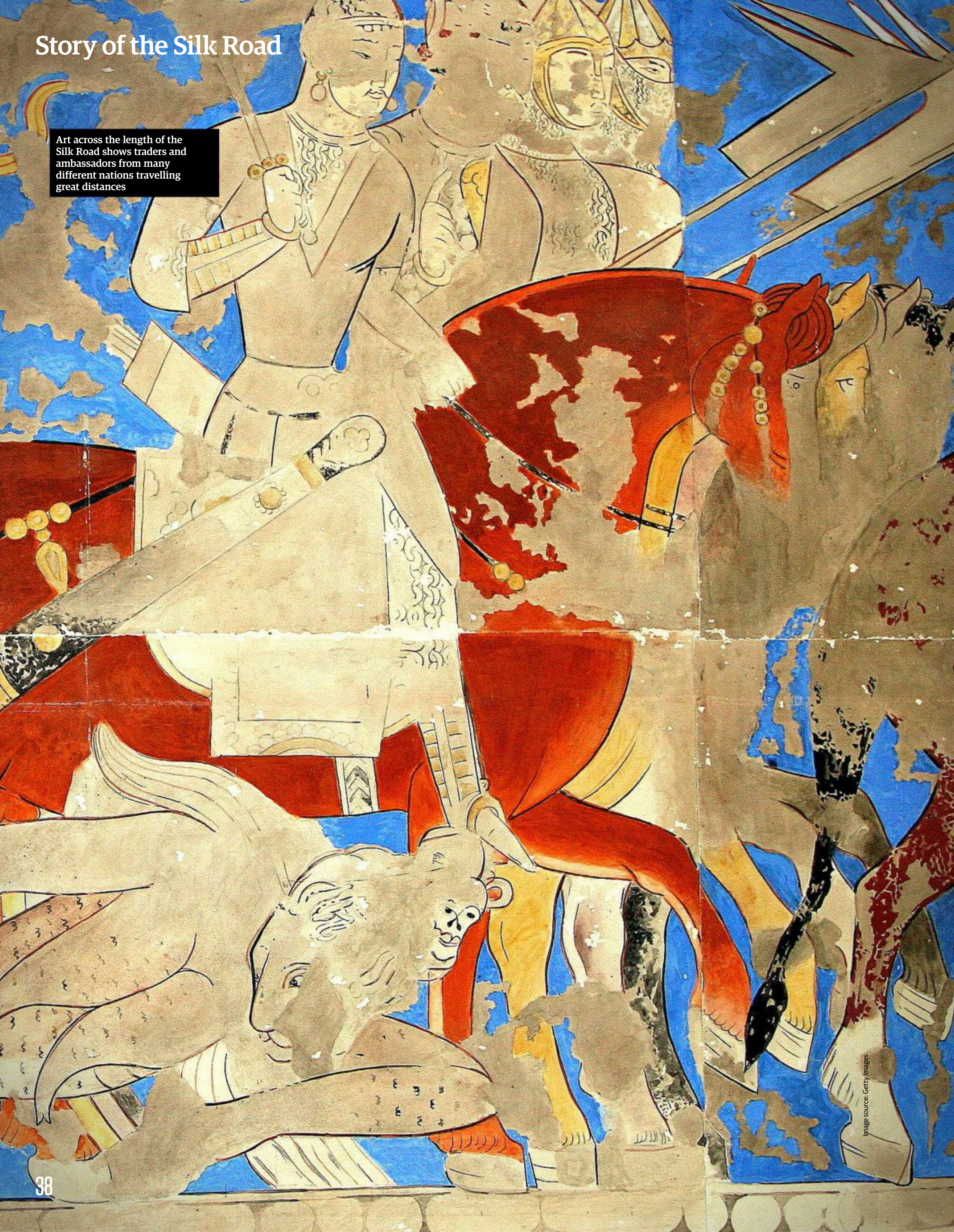
Sixty thousand soldiers gathered at Dunhuang over the next year, intent upon a rematch with Dayuan. They were well-supplied too, with 100,000 oxen, tens of thousands of mules, donkeys, and camels, and 30,000 horses accompanying them on the march.

Reaching Dayuan, the army came out and gave battle, but the missile power of the Chinese, armed abundantly with crossbows, broke the westerners, who retreated back inside their city.

Li now had the rivers that fed Ershi diverted, and the people within soon ran low on water. More than 40 days of siege followed, with Li's men finally securing a breach in Ershi's outer wall. The people of Ershi blamed their king, Wugua, killing him, and parleyed with Li Guangli. They made the Han general an offer. If the Han stopped their attacks, they would come out with their horses and allow them to have their pick of them. In addition, they would deliver food for their soldiers.

Li Guangli considered the offer. He had discovered that the Dayuan had hired a renegade Chinese water engineer who was showing them how to dig wells, and he knew that with their extensive food stores, he might very well be facing a lengthy siege. Better to strike a deal now rather than face a possible defeat later on.

Li Guangli's subordinates Zhao Shicheng and Li Che agreed with his wish to come to an agreement with the Dayuan, and the acceptance of their offer was then communicated to them. The westerners came out of their city with their best horses, and allowed the Han to have their pick. Over 3,000 animals were selected, and Li Guangli, true to his word, departed from Ershi without further bloodshed. The war was over, and the Han army began its march home to China, Heavenly Horses in tow.



Art across the length of the Silk Road shows traders and ambassadors from many different nations travelling great distances

Image source: Getty Images

# Routes on land and sea

## *The Silk Roads stretched from China to the Mediterranean and crossed seas from India to Africa, mixing cultures and goods as never before*

Written by Ben Gazur

**Talking about the Silk Road makes one think of a paved highway that ran directly from one place to another offering an easy path for trade and travel.**

Those who passed along the Silk Road would have laughed bitterly at this picture. For them the Silk Road was in fact many roads that led across many wild places. Depending on the route followed you might have to navigate mountainous passes, cross endless plains, aim for distant oases, or ford mighty rivers. One did not simply set off down the Silk Roads that connected East and West - which makes it all the more impressive that so many did. What *was* it like to cross the known world, then?

To pass out of China to the northwest, those following the northern Silk Road had to pass through the Gansu Corridor. This is a 600 mile long passage that is bordered to the south by the snow-capped Qinghai Mountains and to the north by the Gobi Desert. Only in the corridor could people expect to find relatively safe passage. The water that flowed down from the mountains created watering spots for travellers. These soon developed into towns and cities such as the oasis town of Dunhuang.

Travellers and traders would often pause at the towns they found here to stock up on food for the journey ahead, as well as learn what they could of the terrain they would be facing. During the Han Dynasty of the 2nd century CE this region was home to a nomadic people known as the Xiongnu. While the Chinese viewed them as barbarians the Xiongnu were perfectly capable, thanks to their skilled cavalry, of inflicting brutal military defeats on their neighbours. One Chinese history records how "at that time the Son of Heaven [the emperor] made inquiries among those Xiongnu who had surrendered [as prisoners] and they all reported that the Xiongnu had overcome the king of the Yue-chi and made a drinking-vessel out of his skull."

The Xiongnu continued to menace the Chinese even though they coveted the products of China. A market place was set up by the Chinese at the border of their territories to allow the Xiongnu to buy goods rather than seize them, but gifts were still required to keep them docile. The fear of an invasion by the Xiongnu led to the Emperor sending out an embassy to the Yue-chi people, hoping that an alliance against their common enemy could be formed. The chief envoy sent out was Zhang Qian and the record of his journey over what would turn into the northern Silk Road is one of our earliest sources of such a journey.

Zhang's journey got off to a bad start when he was captured by the Xiongnu and held captive for ten years. Eventually escaping he completed his mission, returning via Bactria, in modern-day northern Afghanistan. In the markets there he was startled to find Chinese goods - they had clearly travelled overland in a way that was not recognised at the time. Asking the traders where they came from they replied "The inhabitants of our country buy them in Shon-tu [India]." On his return the Emperor decided to send out more missions to explore how these routes could profit him. This was to lead to the opening of the Southern Silk Road. But the importance of trade led to the Chinese exerting dominance in the Gansu Corridor.

Slowly the Xiongnu were expelled and Chinese garrisons manned watch towers with beacons along the route. Whenever trouble struck, the beacons would be lit and an army was dispatched to deal with it. The

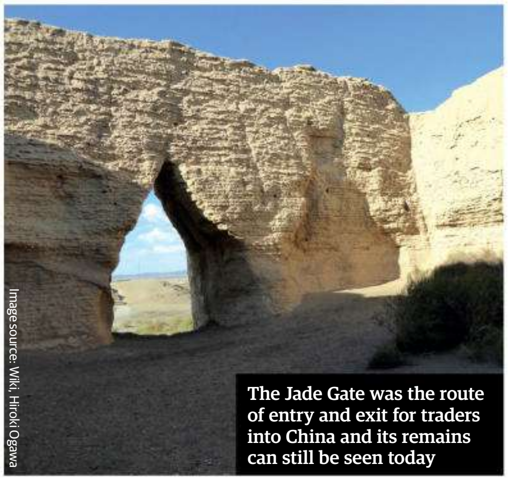
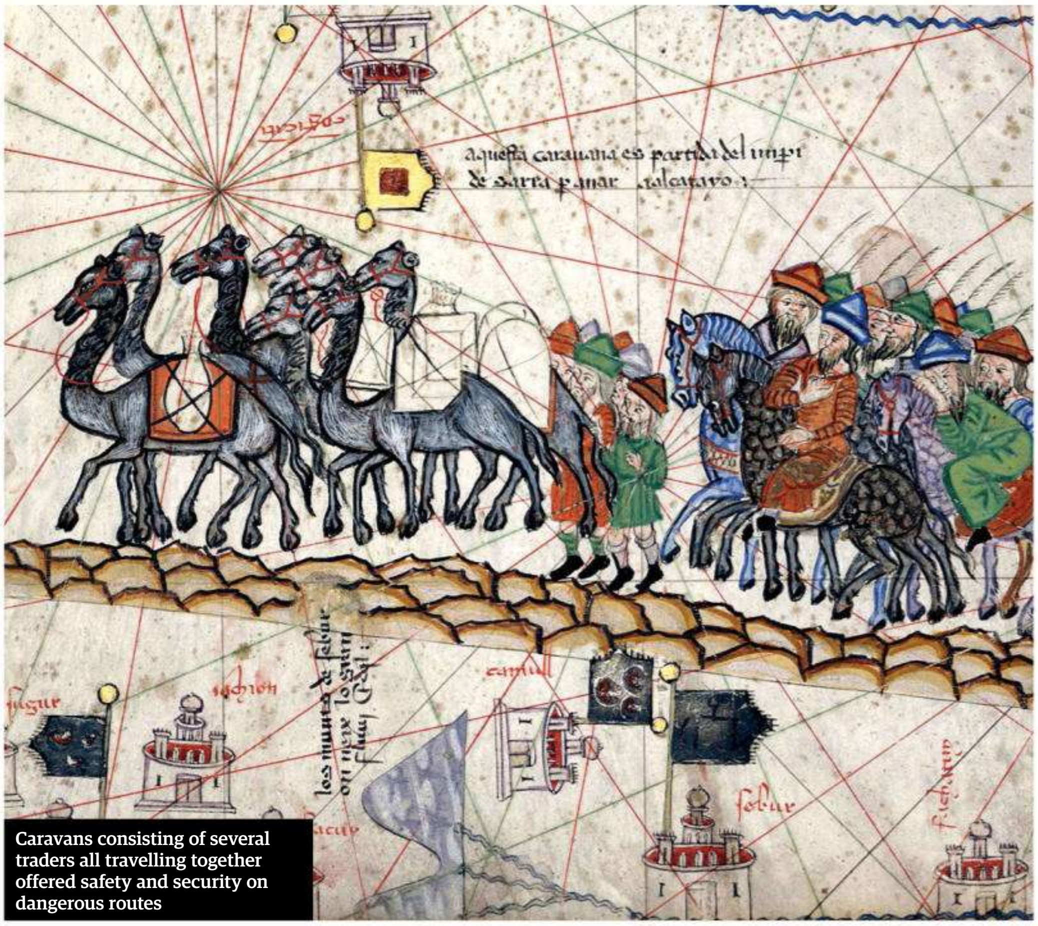

The Jade Gate was the route of entry and exit for traders into China and its remains can still be seen today

Image source: Wiki, Hiroki Ogawa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Caravans consisting of several traders all travelling together offered safety and security on dangerous routes

garrisons also dealt with the travellers along this portion of the Silk Road. A cache of 23,000 documents uncovered at Xuanquan, on wooden strips, silk scraps, and paper dating from around 100 BCE to 100 CE, offers a clear insight into what travel at the time was like.

Visitors to Xuanquan could expect to find a large granary stocked with millet seed, rice, and meat. Serving as a stopping point for the Chinese postal service, there was ample room and supply for horses. Guest rooms were available for both officials and traders passing through the Gansu Corridor. The records of Xuanquan reveal large numbers of foreigners passing through the area. A delegation of 1,074 people from the king of Khotan was accompanied by a Chinese official, while a group composed of several nationalities, which numbered 470, was recorded at another time. Such large numbers could not have been accommodated all at once so most must have camped outside the outpost.

Foreign envoys passing into China were issued with passports that gave them the right to stay in official lodgings and gave them use of a cart for travel. Though they travelled officially as envoys, many of them carrying tribute for the Emperor, some used their travels into China as a means of conducting trade. We know of this because disputes over the values of their trading goods was sometimes reported – as when Chinese officials paid a low price for skinny 'yellow' camels that the sellers insisted were worth more because they were fat and 'white'.

> "It was a rare individual who would cover the whole of the Silk Road. Most traders operated in little loops that went from one town to another"

At the boundary of the Gansu Corridor, known as the Jade Gate, travellers were faced with a choice. Should they journey north, or turn towards the south?

Once out of the Gansu Corridor the first area that had to be crossed was the Tarim Basin that forms the Taklamakan Desert. Travellers were advised to either head north or south, clinging to the mountains that provided water. Those heading north would pass through towns like Hami and Gulja. Those heading south would visit Dunhuang and Niya. Both would end up at Kashgar where they could pass out of the Tarim Basin and avoid the Himalayas.

It was a rare individual who would cover the whole of the Silk Road. Most traders operated in little loops that went from one town to another, trading in both directions. The goods they sold on would be sold to other traders who would carry them further. Most travelled in small caravans with goods carried by animals. In the Tarim Basin most of the heavy lifting was done by camels. These were adopted by the Chinese because of their hardy nature and their ability to travel without the need for smooth terrain or roads.

Most people travelling the Silk Road would have walked or ridden beside their camels, limiting the pace of travel. A caravan of traders moving together offered their slow-moving valuables some protection against raiders and nomads. The size of caravans varied dramatically, with records noting sizes ranging from a dozen camels to several hundred – one was recorded as carrying 10,000 bolts of multi-coloured silk. The larger caravans were often state-sponsored affairs carrying envoys and would have required armed guards to protect them. It was not just human adversaries that traders had to face. Camels were valued because they were able to sense sand-storms. When traders saw their camels huddling together they knew it was time to cover their eyes and faces. The perils of getting lost in the desert were ever present. With no marked road to follow it was easy to miss the next oasis and wind up dying of thirst or exposure among the sands.

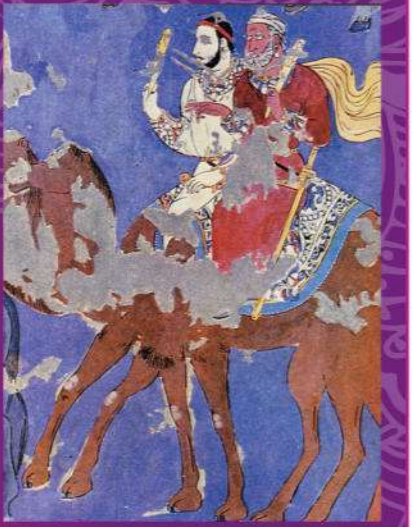
All along the route, trade was monitored, and permission had to be granted by local rulers if you wished to cross their borders. Records from Kucha on the northern route show how each caravan was noted and the people and animals counted. These were written down on passes that were exchanged at the next town. These are important sources for the composition of caravans in the region. The largest recorded in surviving documents was composed of 40 men. We also know of caravans made up entirely of women, except for their caravan leader. A letter dating from around 300 CE written by a Sogdian merchant to those who had sent him to trade with the Chinese shows that profit was not always inevitable. "If I were to write to you everything about how China has fared, it would

## Samarkand and the Silk Road

### Samarkand may be the oldest inhabited city in Central Asia, and its position allowed it to thrive

Its position on the ancient Silk Road allowed it to flourish for nearly 2,500 years. As a city of the Sogdians it would play a role in their rise to becoming the premier traders along the Silk Road.

Samarkand was captured by Cyrus the Great of Persia in the 6th century BCE. This brought it and its people within the huge Persian Empire. This opened trade networks for the city, which reached the shores of the Mediterranean. Later, with the conquests of Alexander, the Sogdian merchants were able to pass eastwards. The Sogdians were incorporated into the Greco-Bactrian kingdom that emerged from the fall of Alexander's empire. There are textual references to Sogdian merchants as far away as China and down into India. One inscription by a trader from Samarkand has been found in Pakistan. "Nanai-vandak, the son of Narisaf, came here on the tenth and has requested the favour from the soul of the holy place Kart that I reach Kharvandan very fast and see my dear brother in good health." Samarkand's fortunes would rise and fall with the prosperity of the Silk Road for centuries, and it remains one of the jewels of Central Asia.



be beyond grief: there is no profit for you." Those who were left behind by traders could also suffer. A Sogdian lady named Miwnay remained at home to manage her husband's business while he went on a trade mission, but her husband failed to return. Left destitute she wrote an accusing letter to her husband telling him of her misfortune and adding "I would rather be a dog's or a pig's wife than yours!"

At Niya, a major oasis town to the south of the Taklamakan Desert, over a hundred wooden blocks written in a north Indian language around 300 CE recount the legal disputes that could arise over trade. Merchants who had struggled across mountains and deserts could find themselves suddenly having to answer charges in front of kings. "When the merchants arrive from China, the debt of silk is to be investigated. If there is a dispute, there will be a decision in our presence in the royal court."

From Kashgar, traders moved westward via either Samarkand or Bactria. From there they passed into modern day Iran and their goods flowed into Europe by either land or sea routes. Few that passed through the Jade Gate would ever make it that far however.

While the Gansu Corridor offered the most obvious route out of China it was not the only one that developed. A trade pathway developed in the south-west of China leading from Chengdu to Lhasa in Tibet, and beyond into modern day Bangladesh. This was known as the Tea Horse Silk Road, and it allowed China to export tea and import sturdy Tibetan ponies - hence its name. It was also one of the routes by which Buddhism entered China. The trade along this path existed for a long time but only truly flourished from around the 10th century CE. Even into the 20th century it was not uncommon to see men

Caravanserai, inns where caravans could rest and restock, such as this one in Iran, were vital to the flow of traffic on the Silk Road

Image source: Wiki, Bernard Gagnon

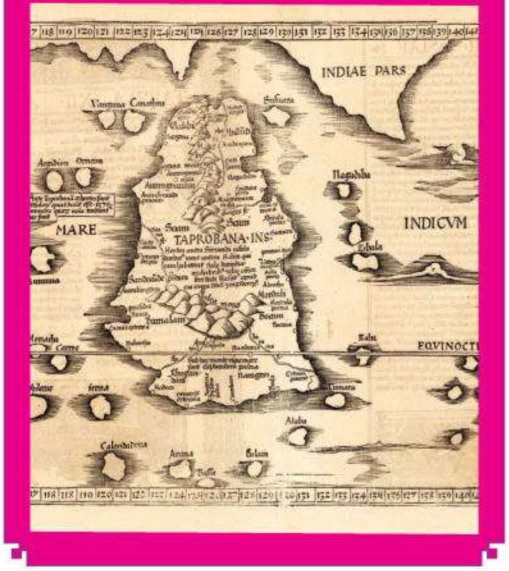
## The island of Taprobane

### Ancient Greek and Roman knowledge of what lay east of India was somewhat questionable

Though Alexander the Great had ventured into India and taken geographers and historians with him, their reports seem to have been lacking many details. Once Alexander's empire fragmented, travel into Asia became more difficult and much information was lost. What did get through was often garbled.

The island of Taprobane, or Taprobana, is a good example of how knowledge spread in the ancient world. According to sources such as Ptolemy and Pliny the Elder, Taprobane was an island that lay off the coast of India. According to Pliny seven days sailing from India will bring you to it and there you will find no cities but hundreds of small villages. The locals were blessed with pearls of prodigious size and gold in great quantities.

Pliny records that during the reign of the Emperor Claudius a tax official was blown off course while sailing around the Arabian Peninsula. Taken in by the king of Taprobane he impressed the king with tales of Rome's greatness. The king therefore sent an embassy, from which Pliny claims to have learned much of his information about the island. Since he also says that whole families live underneath gigantic turtle-shells this must be viewed somewhat suspiciously.



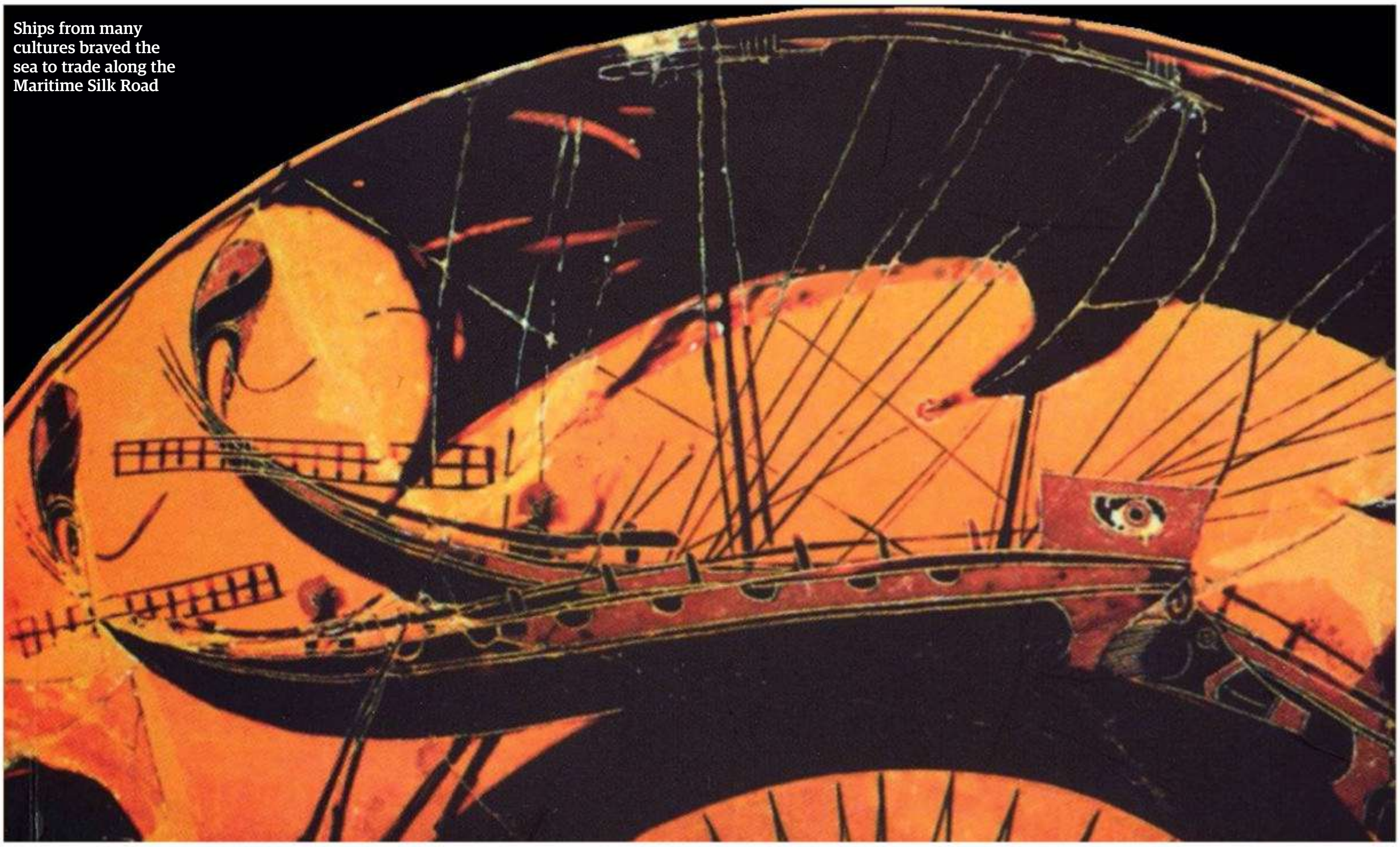
Camels, such as this one bearing a Sogdian trader, were the perfect beasts of burden for crossing arid regions

navigating the vertiginous paths of the Tea Horse Silk Road carrying loads of tea bricks heavier than their bodyweight. The life of a trader has never been an easy one.

For those willing to risk the vagaries and risks of the ocean there was another path that connected the East and West – the Maritime Silk Road. Ocean going vessels that carried large cargoes are well attested from the Bronze Age onward. Given that rivers such as the Ganges penetrate deep into India it was natural that they should be used as routes of transport too. Items that had travelled from China overland were often loaded onto ships in either India or the Parthian Empire and sailed around the Arabian Peninsula to carry them towards Egypt and the Roman Empire.

Around 100 CE a Chinese envoy was sent to the West with the aim of reaching Syria, then part of the Roman Empire. This would have been the first direct contact between the Chinese and Roman empires. The envoy, Kan-Ying, made it to the Parthian Empire and was about to take a ship onward but he was warned "The sea is vast and great; with favourable winds it is possible to cross within three months – but if you meet slow winds, it may also take you two years. It is for this reason that those who go to sea take on board a supply of three years' provisions. There is something in the sea which is apt to make man home-sick, and several have thus lost their lives." When Kan-ying heard this he turned back to China.

It is thought that the Parthians may have wished to stop direct communication between the two empires, as they extracted a great deal of money acting as intermediaries in their trade. A Chinese text of the 5th century CE that describes Egypt in some detail mentions "They always wished to send embassies to Zhongguo [China], but the Ar-hsi



Ships from many cultures braved the sea to trade along the Maritime Silk Road

[Parthians] wanted to make profit out of their trade with us, and would not allow them to pass their country." For the Chinese one of the routes of trade with Rome was a sea path that travelled around the Arabian Peninsula. "[To reach] the country of Ta-ts'in [Roman Syria]... from T'iao-chih [Babylonia] west you go by sea, following a bent path, ten thousand li." The length of the journey between Syria and China caused a number of headaches for Chinese traders. "It is further said that the inhabitants of Ta-ts'in gather the storax plant, squeeze its juice out, and thus make a balsam [hsiang-kao]; they then sell its dregs to the traders of other countries; it thus goes through many hands before reaching Zhongguo [China], and, when arriving here, is not so very fragrant." Trade along the Maritime Silk Road went both ways. In the 1st century CE a text known as *Voyage Around the Erythraean Sea* was written by a Greek-speaking merchant in Egypt that described the sea voyages used to reach India. The author noted how the sea routes had changed as more ships increased in durability and sailors became more skillful. "It was called Eudaemon ['Prosperous'] Arabia, because in the early days of the city when the voyage was not yet made from India to Egypt, and when they did not dare to sail from Egypt to the ports across this ocean, but all came together at this place, it received the cargoes from both countries." Some have calculated that much more money passed out of Rome via sea routes that dealt in the trade of spices from India and China than it did along overland routes. The sea has obvious advantages for traders. Ships can move faster than caravans and a single ship could carry far more than anything but the largest group of traders. The profits of a single venture could be huge. There was, of course, the risk of being wrecked in a storm, becalmed on the ocean, or captured by pirates. Just as on land captains would often ply relatively short stretches of sea as they travelled to a nearby port and back again. When Faxian, a travelling monk, returned to China from India, though, he braved a longer ocean voyage on a merchant vessel. His report shows how dangerous such trips could be.

Faxian "took passage on board a large merchant-vessel on which there were over two hundred souls, and astern of which there was a small vessel in case of accident at sea and the destruction of the big vessel. Catching a fair wind, they proceeded east for two days when they encountered a heavy gale, and the ship sprung a leak. The merchants wished to pass on to the small vessel, but the men on her, afraid that too many would come, cut the rope in two. The merchants were very frightened, for death was close at hand; and fearing that the ship would fill, immediately took what bulky goods there were and threw them into the sea." The monk even lent a hand to bale out the ship with his little jug. He made it home; many other ships were not so lucky.

The Silk Road was a vast and changing network of paths. A piece of silk starting its journey in China might pass through many hands on its way to Rome. It could start on a camel's back, be carried on a mule over mountains, descend into the plains of India on an ox-drawn cart, be loaded on a ship that was blown all the way to Egypt. From there it could be carried by a slave to Alexandria where a trading ship would cross the Mediterranean to Italy. Dozens of traders could have a hand in this passage of a single item before it reached its final destination.

> "The far distant lands they were connected to may have seemed like mythical places"

To those at either end of the Silk Road the far distant lands they were connected to may have seemed like mythical places. They could not have imagined the languages spoken and the cultures that existed there. Yet the lives of traders in all the nations along the road would have been oddly familiar.

# The Golden Ages of Persia

## *In the ancient world, pre-Islamic Persia was a beacon of political centrism and cultural diversity*

Written by April Madden

**One night in 600 BCE, Astyages, king of Media, had a terrible dream. He dreamt that his daughter, Mandane, gave birth to a vine that overgrew his house. It spread all over Media; it surged into neighbouring Lydia, the ancestral home of his queen, Aryenis, until it had run rampant over all of the kingdoms of the land that is today called Iran. It was an omen, Astyages' soothsayers told him. Mandane would bear a child who would supplant their grandfather.**

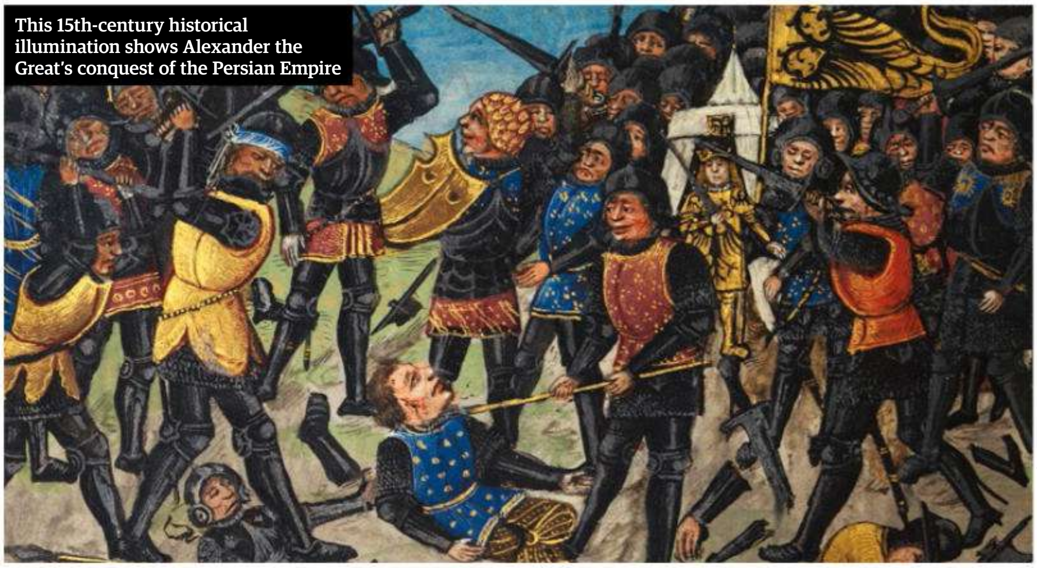
Astyages was perplexed. He had married Mandane off to one of his vassals. Cambyses, first of his name, was the ruler of a small Elamite city-state called Anshan. It had once been an important place, wealthy and cultured, a prize that the old empires had fought over. But that was long ago. Whatever sons Mandane bore to the upstart little monarchy that now ruled it, the scions of these backwater client-kings could never rise to challenge mighty Astyages. Still, better safe than sorry. He sent one of his generals, Harpagus, to Anshan to bring his pregnant daughter home.

What happened next sounds like a fairytale, and perhaps it is, because the Greek historian Herodotus related it. When Mandane's son was born, Harpagus found a shepherd with a stillborn son, swapped them over and presented Astyages with the body. Mandane returned to Anshan; the shepherd, Mitridates, raised her baby. The deception went according to plan until the young Cyrus was in his teens, at which point the apparently genetic kingliness of his nature asserted itself and brought him to the attention of Astyages again. The shepherd confessed, the boy was packed off home where he immediately assumed his battle-weary father's throne, and Harpagus' own son was killed and served up to him on a plate in retribution. Herodotus was never one to let the facts get in the way of a good yarn, and his version of events, with all the conventions of Greek myth, owes more to legend than it does to fact. Nevertheless, the people in the tale are real enough, particularly Cyrus II, better known to posterity as Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire.

> "Persepolis, the ancient Persian capital, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979"

Cyrus' empire, however, began almost by accident. He took some territories by fighting invasive forces back to the cities they'd come from; he inherited others. By the time Cyrus had developed a taste for conques, he had taken Sumer, Akkad and Babylonia; he swept through Asia Minor. He was proclaimed the king of the four corners of the world. But, unlike other empire builders, Cyrus didn't demand homogenous unity from his conquests – vassal states retained their own cultures and cultural practices. When Cyrus took the ancient, fabled city of Babylon, he ensured religious freedoms for all of its culturally diverse peoples, meaning that the Jewish exiles there could practice their faith openly once more.

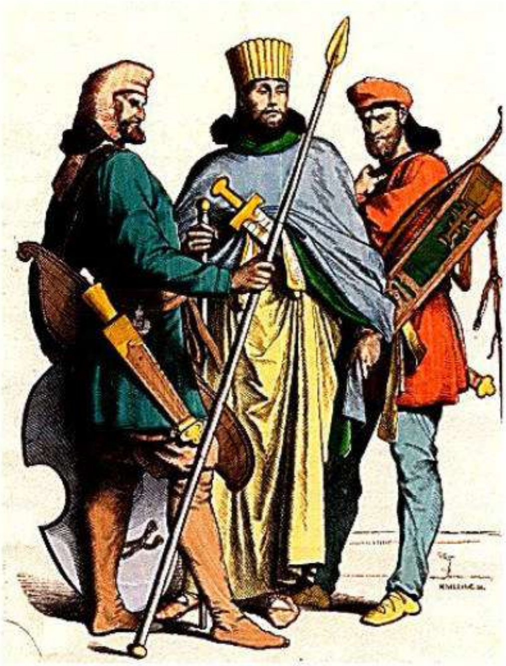
Cyrus' fledgling Achaemenid Empire was characterised by its embrace of diversity, and this was a social constant throughout the years that followed. People in its assorted city-states adopted styles of jewellery, clothing and other fashions from different parts of the empire; textiles and pottery embraced new designs from far-flung places. Key to this was the way that the empire was structured, maximising both peace and profit. Each region was governed by a local overlord called a satrap who combined local administration with imperial policy. All free subjects were considered equal under the law no matter what ethnic group they came from, and though there was a state religion, local faiths, customs, laws and trade agreements were left in place. Women worked and held supervisory positions in many professions and trades, a convention in some parts of the empire that was adopted by others. Meanwhile



This 15th-century historical illumination shows Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire

Image source: Wiki

Image source: Getty



Ancient Persian fashion drew widely from the clothing styles of a diverse empire. Wealthier classes favoured flowing robes while active people like soldiers preferred practical trousers

Image source: Wiki

Achaemenid Persia was famous for its artisans, who produced work like these stunning gold drinking vessels, now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art

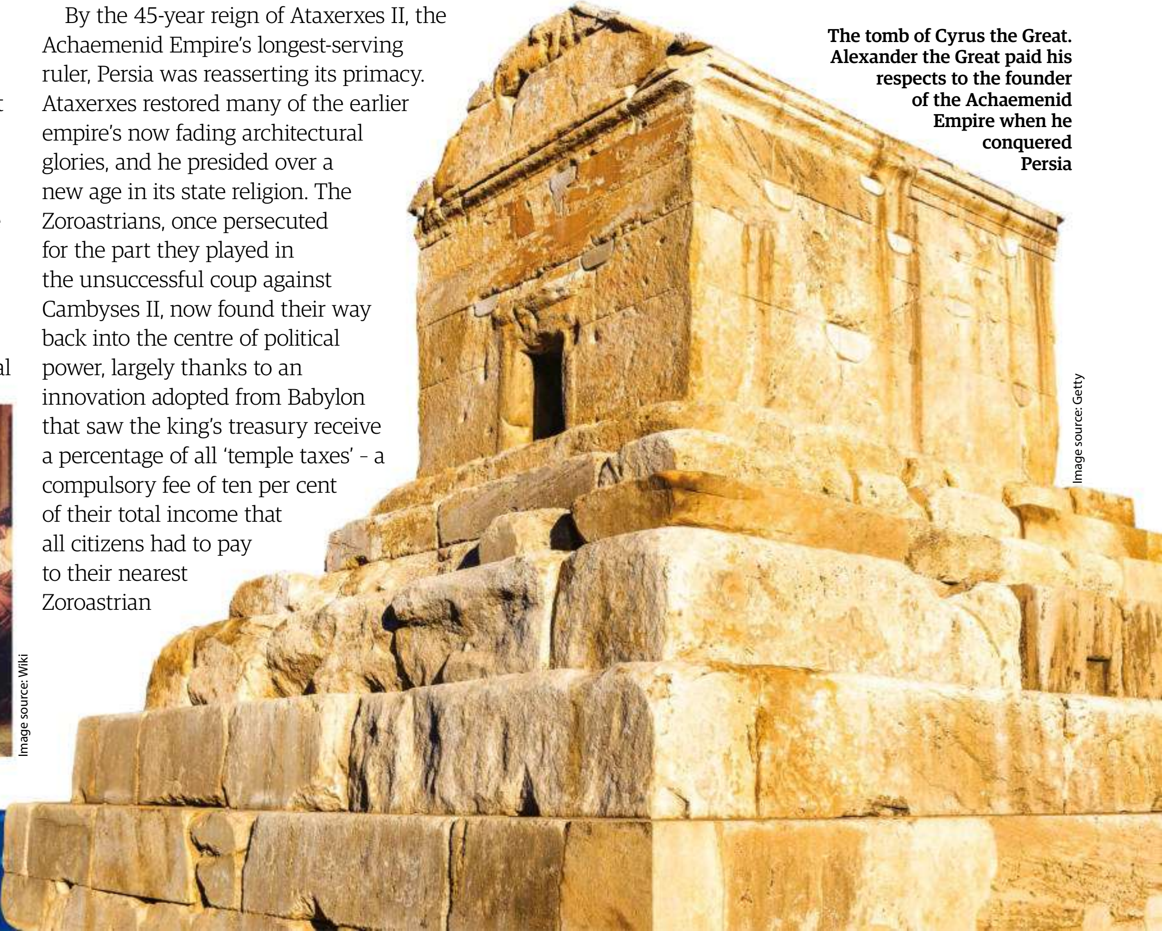
Image source: Wiki

the empire kept the peace, collected taxes and undertook public works through its satrapy network, administered from the new capital of Pasargadae that Cyrus had founded. It ruled over a cultural melting pot, a sprawling, well-managed and wealthy empire that at its height claimed dominion over 44 per cent of the world's population – the largest relative rulership of population of any empire in history.

It wasn't to last. When Cyrus' tyrannical, tax-hungry son Cambyses II conducted ill-advised forays into Egypt, the state priesthood inserted a usurper into his place, claiming he was Cambyses' brother. The dissatisfied population didn't care that their new king was a puppet for the Zoroastrian theocracy; they embraced him – for about seven months, until another true Achaemenid took the throne. Under Darius the Great, the Persian Empire blossomed like never before. Where Cyrus had laid foundations, he built walls. He organised the provinces and the satrapy, he introduced uniform coinage and standardised weights and measures throughout the empire, he made Aramaic its official language, he constructed roads that fed into the Silk Road network. The empire that had always embraced diversity now found it even quicker and easier to trade goods, money and ideas. He founded its great ceremonial capital, Persepolis, a city of 100 pillars and 40 minarets, although much of the real governance of the empire actually happened in ancient, well-established local capitals like Babylon, Ecbatana and Susa. But Darius also made poor decisions. After spectacular defeats by Greece at the Battles of Marathon in 490 BCE and Thermopylae in 480 BCE, Persia was left on something of a back footing in the new Hellenic world order.

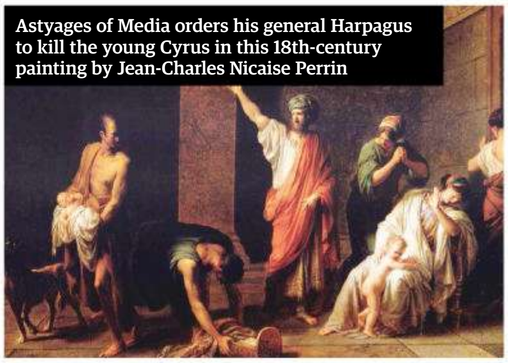
By the 45-year reign of Ataxerxes II, the Achaemenid Empire's longest-serving ruler, Persia was reasserting its primacy. Ataxerxes restored many of the earlier empire's now fading architectural glories, and he presided over a new age in its state religion. The Zoroastrians, once persecuted for the part they played in the unsuccessful coup against Cambyses II, now found their way back into the centre of political power, largely thanks to an innovation adopted from Babylon that saw the king's treasury receive a percentage of all 'temple taxes' – a compulsory fee of ten per cent of their total income that all citizens had to pay to their nearest Zoroastrian

> *"The first Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great, is also known as the Achaemenid Empire"*



The tomb of Cyrus the Great. Alexander the Great paid his respects to the founder of the Achaemenid Empire when he conquered Persia

Image source: Getty



Astyages of Media orders his general Harpagus to kill the young Cyrus in this 18th-century painting by Jean-Charles Nicaise Perrin

Image source: Wiki

Image source: Wiki

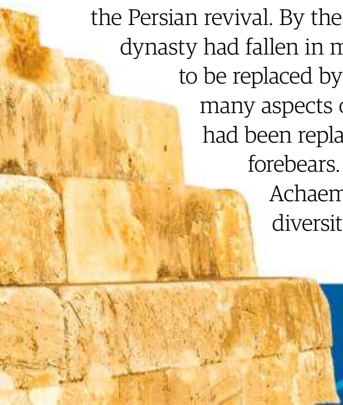
A coin depicting Ataxerxes II, the longest-reigning monarch of the Achaemenid Empire, who ruled for 45 years

temple. In an empire replete with artisans – predominantly metalworkers, weavers, potters and stonemasons – who made beautiful, expensive things from its rich resources this was lucrative indeed, but the fee was even payable by subsistence farmers who grew the grains, fruit and vegetables that fed the majority of the empire, although the old-fashioned nomadic tribes who raised cattle, goats and sheep often moved too quickly to be subject to it. And when Ataxerxes III took Egypt in 343 BCE, the incalculably valuable resources, money and learning of one of the ancient world's most advanced nations enriched Persia's all-embracing melting pot still further.

But the old enemy, Greece, hadn't forgotten Persia, and once it had united under the banner of Alexander III of Macedon (Alexander the Great), it toppled the Achaemenid Empire once and for all. Alexander paid his respects at Cyrus the Great's tomb and was disturbed to find it looted by thieves. He questioned the Zoroastrian priesthood, ostensibly about what he viewed as the blasphemous desecration of the tomb (Cyrus was a hero of his) but he was in fact suspicious of their influence on his new conquest's politics and society. Alexander went on to adopt much of the Achaemenid Empire's approach to civil service and multiculturalism to manage his own vast conquests, but upon his early death Persia became just another broken remnant of the once-unified Alexandrian Empire that had been inspired by it.

Under the rule of the ethnically, culturally Grecian Seleucid Empire, it was just another little bit of Macedonian Hellas cast adrift, until the Persians seized back control in 247 BCE. The newly arisen Parthian Empire maintained Greek customs at court for perhaps 50 years before giving in to a popular movement sweeping through the territory: the Persian revival. By the time the Parthian dynasty had fallen in mysterious circumstances to be replaced by the Sasanian Empire, many aspects of Hellenic culture had been replaced by their Persian forebears. But where the Achaemenid Empire embraced diversity, the Sasanian embraced religious fundamentalism. Zoroastrianism's star rose once more.

This was in part a reaction to the Christianisation of the Roman territories nearby, a political decision that had very little to do with whatever faith the multi-ethnic Persian citizenry practiced behind closed doors. Secular Persia was still tolerant of a variety of religions, particularly Judaism, but under the new, codified structures of state-sponsored Zoroastrianism, heresy, apostasy and the practice of Christianity were harshly punished crimes. In actual fact, the Zoroastrian priesthood was worried about the wrong faith: their theocratic grasp on the empire was eventually toppled in the 7th century by Islam, the new religion of the Arab skirmishers who had been harrying the Sasanian borders and eventually toppled the empire. The conquerors adopted the Babylonian concept of the temple tax, now renamed 'jizya', and used it to extort their once diverse subjects into adopting the culturally homogenous society of the caliphate states. The glory days of multicultural Persia were no more.



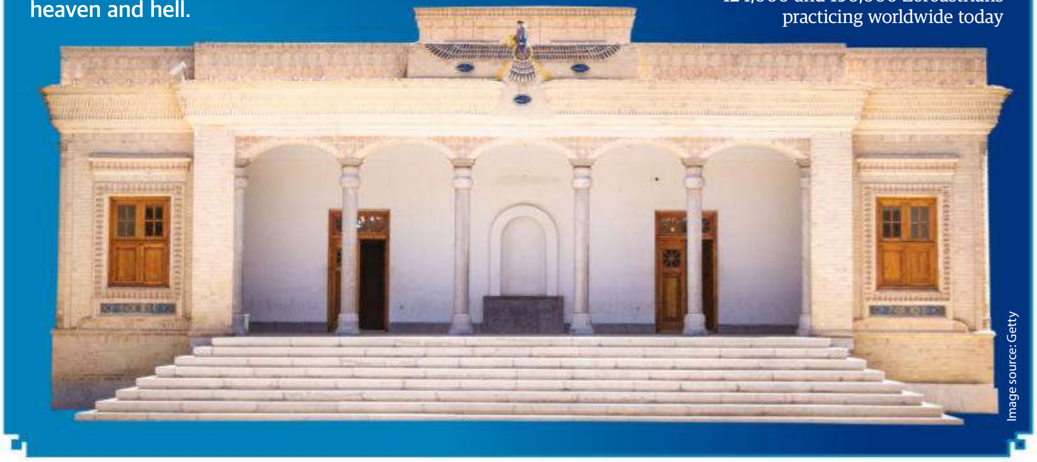
## Following a wise god

### Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion that pits itself against evil and chaos

One of the oldest practiced religions in the world, Zoroastrianism is a faith that is still followed today. Based on the ancient teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, it's a monotheistic faith that worships Ahura Mazda, or 'wise lord'. The god was initially invoked and worshipped alone; during the reign of Ataxerxes II he began to be invoked as part of a trinity with Mithra, a god of truth, justice and oath-keeping, and Anahita, a fertility goddess of water and wisdom. The religion's teachings concentrate on the eternal struggle between good and evil, in which the latter will eventually be vanquished. Many of its philosophical and cosmological ideas have influenced other world religions, notably the concept of a holy trinity, judgement in the afterlife, and the idea of heaven and hell.

In contemporary practice, Zoroastrianism is an open-minded and sometimes syncretic religion that's focused on the act of doing good. It has adopted localised influences from the territories it found itself in during the golden ages of the Persian Empire, which saw it travel as far as parts of India. Suppressed during the Arab conquest of Persia, it was Zoroastrianism's continual practice in outlying territories along the Silk Roads that kept its flame alive: an important idea in the faith, which treats fire and water as elements of ritual purification. In the ancient world, practitioners of Zoroastrianism were called 'magi', from which our word 'magic' derives.

The Zoroastrian fire temple in Yazd, Iran. It's thought that there are between 124,000 and 190,000 Zoroastrians practicing worldwide today



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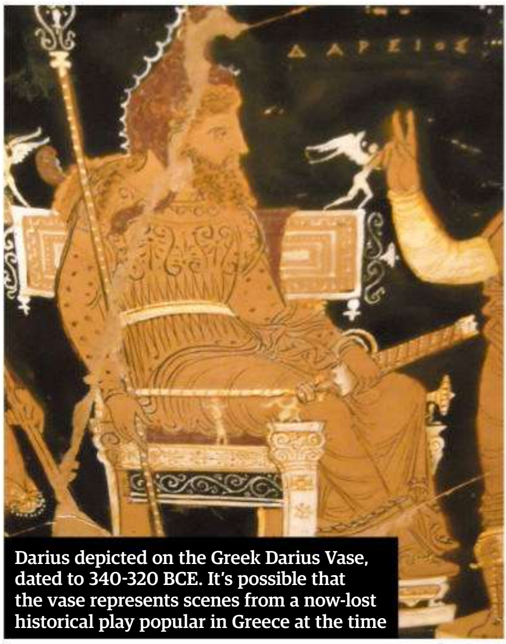
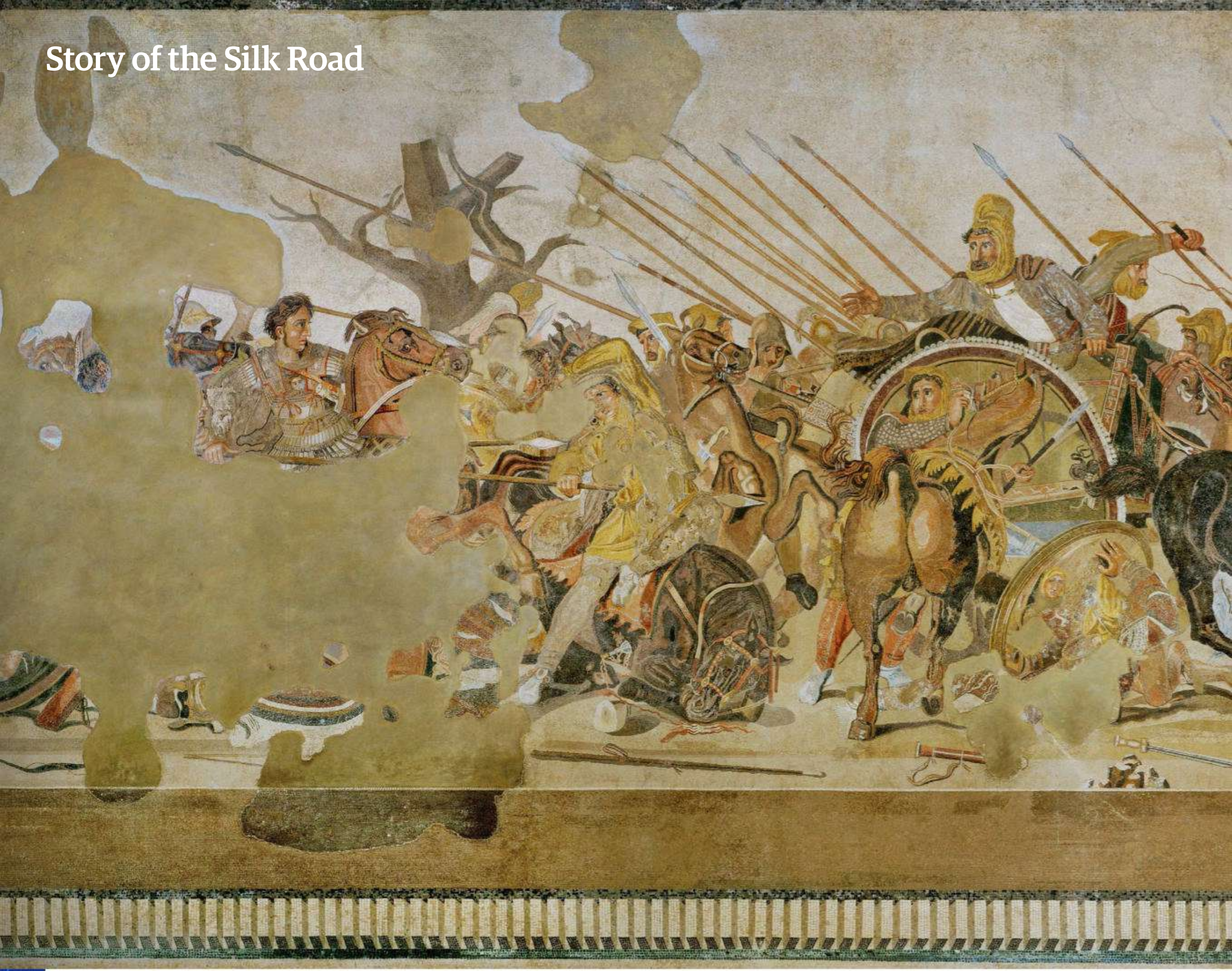


Darius depicted on the Greek Darius Vase, dated to 340-320 BCE. It's possible that the vase represents scenes from a now-lost historical play popular in Greece at the time

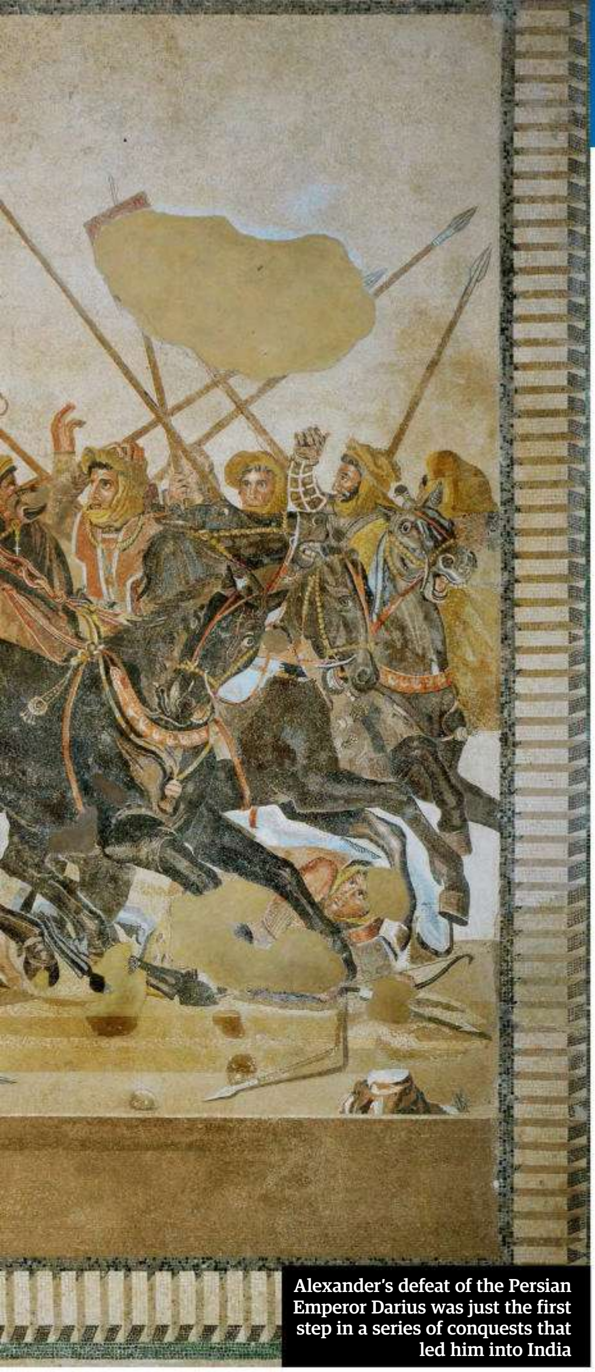
Image source: wiki



# Alexander on the Silk Roads

*Alexander the Great led his Greek forces on paths that would take them beyond the edge of their world*

Written by Ben Gazur



Alexander's defeat of the Persian Emperor Darius was just the first step in a series of conquests that led him into India

Image source: Wikimedia

Alexander's light cavalry forces turned many battles and made swift use of the Persian road network

Image source: Wikimedia

**Alexander the Great inherited the kingdom of Macedon in 336 BCE. At that time considered be on the edge of the civilised world, in the space of 13 years he transformed his kingdom into the largest empire that had ever existed at that point. The expansion of his domain from the West deep into the heart of Asia was one that closely followed what would become known as the Silk Road.**

Though it is common to speak of 'Ancient Greece' or 'Classical Greece' it is actually inaccurate to speak of it as if it was a single nation. Mainland Greece was a patchwork of city-states of various sizes. Some might be no larger than a town with a little bit of farmland while others like Sparta covered larger areas with subject towns within them. Each was fiercely independent of the others and there was a tendency for them to go to war against each other.

It must also be remembered that these city states had long sent out colonists to found cities around the Mediterranean. Everywhere from modern southern France, Sicily, Italy, and Turkey you could find communities of Greek speakers that traded with their mother cities. Though the Greeks were dispersed they shared an ideal of Hellenism – that they were in some ways united by their shared language and religion. Those outside of the Greek family were termed Barbaroi – barbarians. To the north of mainland Greece there was a nation that was viewed as only semi-civilised. The Macedonians spoke a dialect of Greek but were not thought of as fully Greek. Their habit of assassinating their own kings was seen as a poor way of organising a society. When Macedonian kings wished to take part in the Olympic Games, open only to Greeks, they had to rely on their supposed descent from the Greek hero Heracles as Macedonians were not thought to be Greek enough. Alexander the Great's father Philip II sent horses to compete in the Olympic Games and tradition has it that the very day his team took first place his son was born. Philip was not content to simply claim Greek cultural cachet for his own however – he wanted to lead the Greek world. From a young age Philip had been a soldier and a skilled general. He transformed the Macedonian army into one of the most effective fighting forces ever seen.

> "The Macedonians spoke a dialect of Greek but were not thought of as fully Greek. Their habit of assassinating their own kings was seen as a poor way of organising a society"

His major innovation was arming his soldiers with a spear called a sarissa that was nearly six metres long. When a phalanx of soldiers held them out towards the enemy the overlapping rows of sarissas presented an impenetrable and bristling barrier. Philip also turned his army into a nation on the move. While battles between the Greek city-states often only involved relatively short marches Philip's forces had to cross hundreds of miles of tough terrain. He slimmed down the weighty armour each soldier had to carry and improved the vital baggage train. Because the harnesses of the beasts of burden pulling carts put pressure on their windpipes, limiting the amount the could haul, Philip reduced the army's reliance on them. Pack animals and human muscle were preferred.

Philip managed to subdue most of Greece with his military successes and was named Hegemon, leader, of a united Greek force that was to invade the Persian Empire. Unfortunately for Philip an assassin's blade cut short his ambitions. Fortunately for the Greeks there was a new commander waiting in the wings. Alexander would take his forces into Asia to finish the campaign imagined by his father.

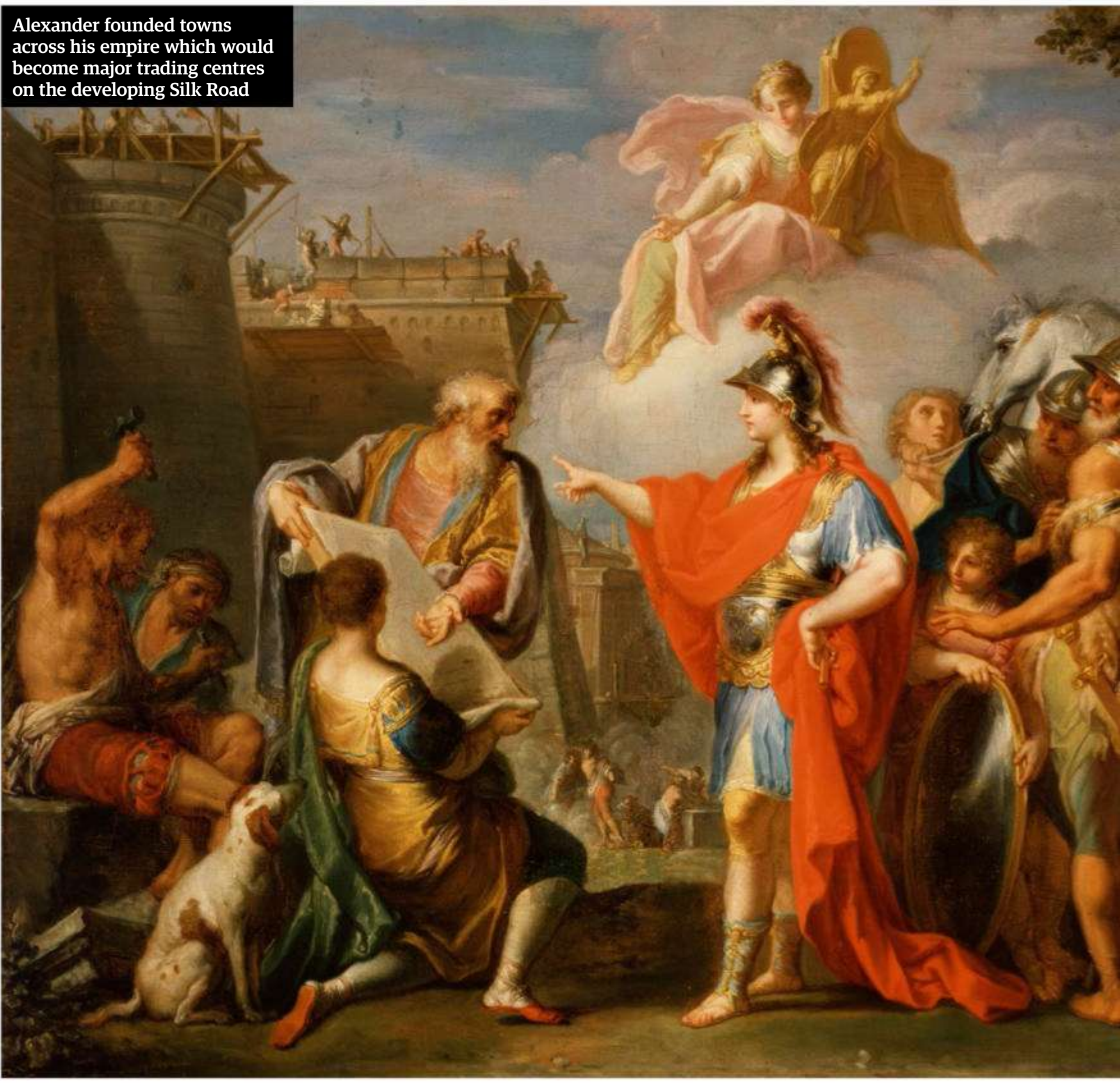
Just as the Greeks looked down on the Macedonians as uncivilised so too did the Persians look down on the Greeks. Persia was a splendidly wealthy empire and prided itself on its beautiful lands and the artistic achievements of its craftsmen. Greece to them seemed like a backwater of goat-farmers living in hovels. The Greeks for their part saw the Persians as soft and effeminate – but they could not shake their admiration for the gold and silver of the Empire. Euripides' *The Bacchae* features the god Dionysus describing how he came from the "fabulously wealthy East." More than one Greek mind had been turned by the promise of bounty from Persia.

Ambassadors sent to the Persian Empire were ridiculed on stage, by Aristophanes in *The Acharnians*, as coming back dressed in the rich fabrics of Persia and carrying fat purses of gold they had been bribed with. Persian gold had poured into Greece for centuries. The Persian Empire had at various times funded the Spartans to fight against the Athenians and the Athenians to fight against the Spartans. By funding both sides at different times the Persians helped to keep the city-states of Greece disunited and unable to threaten them. There was also fear of Persian money being used directly against the Greeks to fund armies. Twice the great forces of Persia had swept into Greece only to be turned back in life-or-death struggles. Demosthenes tells us that King Darius of Persia could bring 1,200 camels loaded with gold to pay for his military affairs if he wished to invade Greece.

All that gold was a sore temptation for Greeks to invade. They recognised that much of the wealth of Persia came from even further east and knew how it was transported about the empire. Herodotus tells us of the riders on the Persian Royal Road: "Now there is nothing mortal that accomplishes a course more swiftly than do these messengers." The Royal Road was one of the great achievements of the Persians. A message could be carried on horseback, with relays of messengers and fresh horses waiting along the road, covering 1,600 miles in just nine days. The Royal Road was an inviting route into the East.

The Greeks were thrilled by tales of what they thought of as the exotic East. Some of it was suspect – such as Herodotus' tales of hairy ants that dug up gold. He may have heard rumours of gophers whose burrows did sometimes turn up gold but much of the East was unknown to the Greeks. Aristotle, tutor of a young Alexander, would have instilled in him a curiosity about nature that might have driven him onwards too. When he did go East he took with him philosophers, historians, and other scholars to record what he saw – but he also took his army.

In a series of stunning and unlikely victories Alexander defeated first the governing satraps of Persian provinces and then King Darius himself at the Battle of Gaugamela. As Darius fled, Alexander was proclaimed the new Great King of Persia. It was at this point that Alexander began to dress in a Persian style and put on foreign airs that his Macedonians found worrying. The Persian Great Kings had long been greeted with a rite known as proskynesis. Anyone approaching them had to lie flat out on the floor and kiss the earth. For Greeks this was an act appropriate only to the gods but Alexander began to demand it for himself. So strong was Greek objection to this that he eventually abandoned it but it would not be the last time that he attempted to meld Eastern and Greek practices.



Alexander founded towns across his empire which would become major trading centres on the developing Silk Road

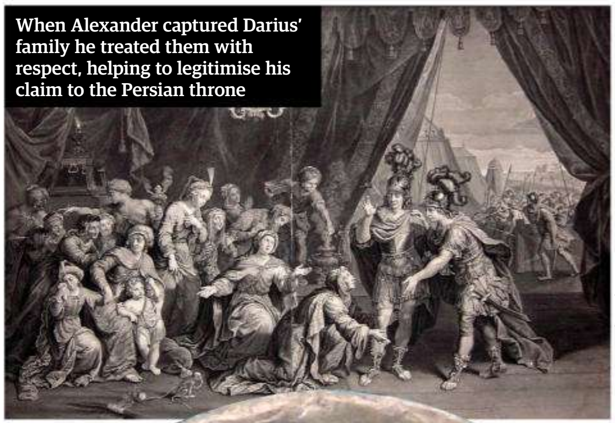
Image source: Wikimedia

Alexander is thought to have captured over 200,000 talents of gold – a talent being enough to hire 6,000 people for a day. With untold wealth at his disposal instead returning it to Greece or consolidating his power in Persia Alexander led his troops onwards. The Royal Road of Persia opened up all of Asia.

The Persian Empire at the time of Alexander's conquest stretched from modern day Turkey all the way to Bactria and the edges of India. One of the aspects of Persian culture that had impressed the Greeks was that tribute was paid to the king regularly from such distant places. The transport of gold and goods over thousands of miles necessitated well-kept roads and secure trade networks. The greatest source of income for the King was via taxation on trade so monitoring movement over a regulated series of roads was absolutely vital.

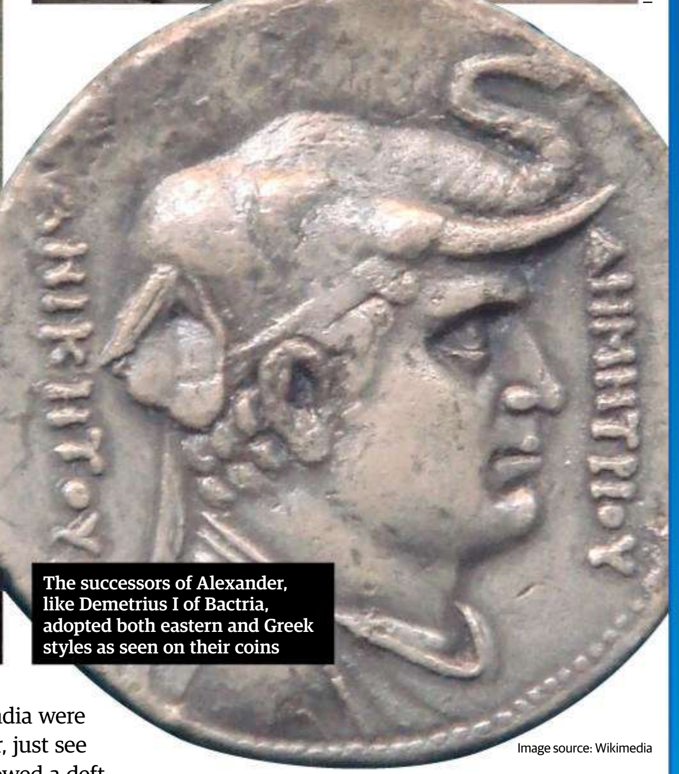
The roads did not stop at the borders of the empire though. At Makran the Persian roads passed into India allowing trade and commerce into the East. And this was where Alexander wanted to go. Alexander had an endless thirst for conquest and exploration. Plutarch tells us that Alexander once heard the philosopher Anaxarchus deliver a lecture on the infinite number of worlds in the cosmos. Alexander wept. When his companions asked what was wrong Alexander replied "Is it not worthy of tears that, when the number of worlds is infinite, we have not yet become lords of a single one?" India was thought to be the seat of wonders and riches beyond even those of Persia.

> "Is it not worthy of tears that, when the number of worlds is infinite, we have not yet become lords of a single one?"



When Alexander captured Darius' family he treated them with respect, helping to legitimise his claim to the Persian throne

Image source: Wikimedia



The successors of Alexander, like Demetrius I of Bactria, adopted both eastern and Greek styles as seen on their coins

Image source: Wikimedia

Pearls from the sea that flowed out of India were particularly valued. We cannot, however, just see Alexander as a greedy plunderer. He showed a deft hand in dealing with the cultures of his newly conquered lands. In Egypt he paid homage to the sacred Apis Bull and when his arch enemy Darius was treacherously slain by his own men he gave the fallen king a burial fitting to his status. A later Roman source has Alexander tell his commanders "I did not come into Asia to wipe out its races entirely or transform half the world into a desert… If we wish to hold Asia and not merely pass through it we must impart our clemency to these people." By this point Alexander was commanding a mixed force of Greeks and Persians – former enemies were fighting side by side.

As Alexander approached India he conquered Bactria and Sogdiana. It was following the siege of the Sogdian Rock, a supposedly impenetrable fortress, that Alexander married a noble lady of the region called Roxana. Alexander's father Philip had taken many wives at the same time as a way of cementing alliances and this may have inspired Alexander to follow suit, as the Macedonian king would later marry the Persian princess Stateira.

Alexander eventually reached the Indus river basin, which was dominated by several local kings. Though known to the former Persian rulers, this area was beyond the boundaries of the old empire. Alexander sought to conquer as much land as possible but was checked by a costly victory against Porus and his elephants at the battle of Hydaspes. Alexander's army became restless. Some of the men had followed him for thousands of miles from their homes in Macedonia and thought that their king would never stop marching.

Plutarch tells us that "As for the Macedonians, however, their struggle with Porus blunted their courage and stayed their further advance into India." Across the Ganges they saw other kings and armies waiting for them to try and cross. Seeing that he could not force his men on, Alexander relented and broke camp. But to secure the borders of his territory and see what lay to the south he sailed his army down the Ganges to the

## The many Alexandrias

### Alexander's army was not only a conquering force – it served as a colonising one

Wherever Alexander went he founded new cities that acted as places for his discharged soldiers to settle. These new cities strengthened the empire he was creating. One notable feature was that these cities often bore his name – which is why Alexandrias can be found from Egypt to India.

Alexander's mission as he saw it was to bring Greek civilisation to areas it had never reached before. A city built in the Greek style was a showcase of Hellenic civilisation and a huge advertisement to his new subjects about the benefits his rule could offer. Positioned along trade routes, these cities protected goods in transit and ensured a constant flow of money and resources across the empire. These staging posts would continue to flourish in the following centuries along the Silk Road.

Dozens of little pockets of the Greek world named Alexandria, or variants of the name, were left throughout Central Asia and the Near East. Some, like Alexandroupolis founded in Thrace, disappeared quickly from the historical record. Others, like Alexandria in Egypt, would become major centres of trade and intellectual life. It is in the Egyptian Alexandria that the melding of different cultures that Alexander desired came closest to realisation and flourished for centuries.

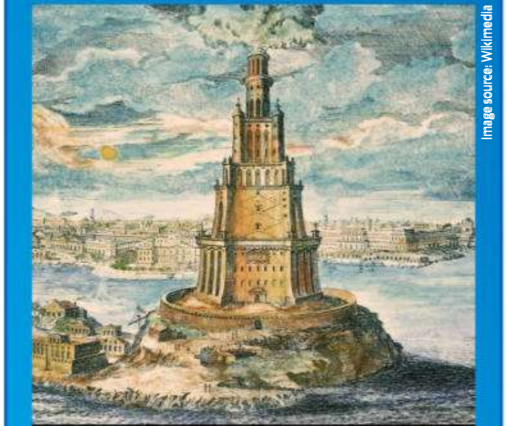


Image source: Wikimedia

Alexandria in Egypt would become home to one of the ancient wonders of the world – as well as Greeks, Jews, Egyptians, and others sea. The return of Alexander's army was a long and bitter journey that crossed parched deserts and led to heavy losses. Alexander did eventually make his way back to Babylon and the heart of his new empire. The whole world waited to see what he would do with his dominion.

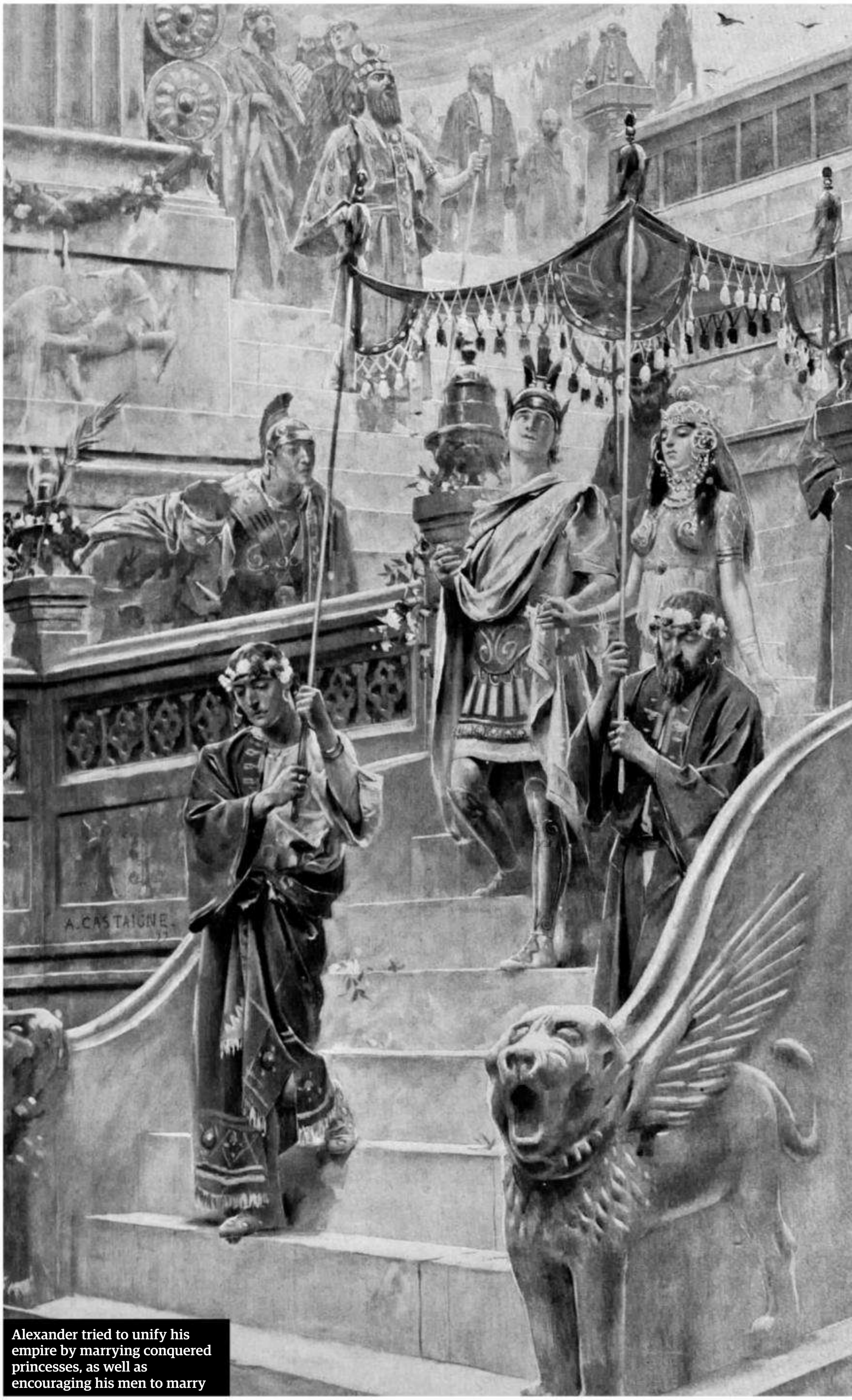
To some extent the Persian Empire of the Achaemenid kings had always been a multinational and multiethnic one. Given the vast size of its territories it was natural that peoples in different parts should have different cultures. From the Ionian Greek cities of Asia Minor to the Bactrians of the east, so long as tribute flowed to the Persian kings all was well. It would have been easy for Alexander to simply step into the soft slippers of the Persian kings and rule a disparate collective realm as they did.

Alexander's vision, though, was one of a truly united empire. Alexander had been born of Philip of Macedon and Olympius of Epirus. As such, a number of Macedonians had viewed him as of mixed birth, not a true Macedonian heir to Philip. Now he sought to create unity by marrying his Macedonian officers to his new subjects to create a generation who could boast ancestry from both halves of his empire. Greek and barbarian would serve together until their children replaced them.

*"The Persian Empire of the Achaemenid kings had always been a multinational and multiethnic one. Given the vast size of its territories it was natural that peoples in different parts should have different cultures."*

This was not always welcome. On one of his campaigns, Alexander's army mutinied at Opis. One of his men told him "Sire, what grieves the Macedonians is that you have already made some Persians your 'kinsmen', and the Persians are called 'kinsmen' of Alexander and are allowed to kiss you, while not one of the Macedonians has been granted this honour." Alexander turned this to his advantage by naming all the Macedonians his 'kinsmen' and winning them round.

It was on his return to Persia in 324 BCE that Alexander held a mass marriage ceremony at Susa. These weddings were between his officers and high-born ladies of Persia. Alexander himself married two Persian princesses. The true feelings



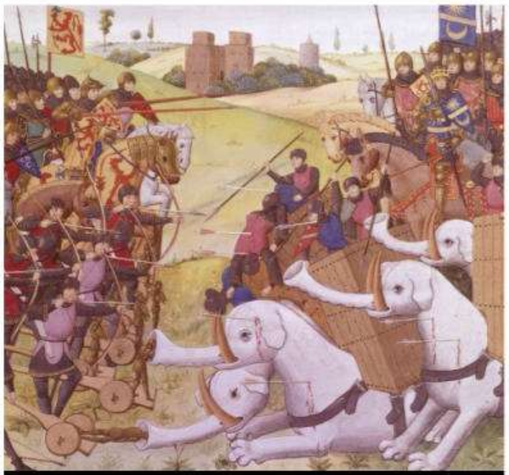
Alexander tried to unify his empire by marrying conquered princesses, as well as encouraging his men to marry

Image source: Wikimedia

about this attempt to weld his various peoples together can be seen by the outcome of the marriages – after Alexander's death every one of his commanders divorced his Persian bride.

There were pragmatic reasons for Alexander's incorporation of Persians and others into his army and company. It would have been impossible to control his empire with just the men of Macedon. Constant demands for replacement troops from his homeland depleted the manpower of Macedon, and the Greek city-states that had given hegemony to Philip were always ready to rebel against Alexander who was so far away. Persian manpower was essential. When 30,000 Bactrians arrived in Susa they were trained in fighting in the phalanx style and, in a move that worried his Greek soldiers, called the Epigonoi – "successors"

With his new territories Alexander was able to draw on greater resources than any Greek before him. He was keen to make full use of not only the materials available but the knowledge. On the Indian campaign snake bites had proved deadly to his troops but the medical skills of the local doctors had saved many. Alexander had also been impressed by the wisdom of Indian sages. When he asked why some were stamping their feet he was told that they were showing him that the ground under a person's feet was all that they could ever truly own. One of the sages, Calanus, joined the Macedonian army. On the return to Persia, feeling himself weak and old, Calanus built a funeral pyre and burned himself alive on it. His last words to Alexander were that they would meet together again in Babylon.



The battle between Alexander and the elephant cavalry of Porus in India fascinated artists – even when they did not know what an elephant looked like

It was in Babylon that Alexander soon fell sick after a drinking bout. After 14 days of fever the young king died aged just 32. Tradition has it that when asked who should succeed him he said "The Strongest." No one though was strong enough to keep together all Alexander had won however.

Alexander's empire had created a single trading bloc that covered much of the known world at the time. He left no legitimate heir to this and it was unclear whether Roxana, who was pregnant at the time, would produce a son who could succeed. It was left to Alexander's commanders to settle matters. These men were known as the Diadochi and they soon splintered his realm into several kingdoms. Their efforts to hold on to their realms involved a great deal of Hellenisation – attempting to make their kingdoms more Greek. Their achievements in this are why historians call this period the Hellenistic Age. By far the most successful of the Diadochi was Ptolemy, who managed to hold on to Egypt and produced in Alexandria a blended civilisation.

Greek language and culture spread throughout Central Asia and into India along with coins produced in the Greek style with the portraits of Greek kings on them. Yet the flow was not all one way. Prior to Alexander's empire the Greeks had no idea about the existence of China. At its peak his empire touched the plains of Fergana – an area that would soon become of great interest to the Chinese.

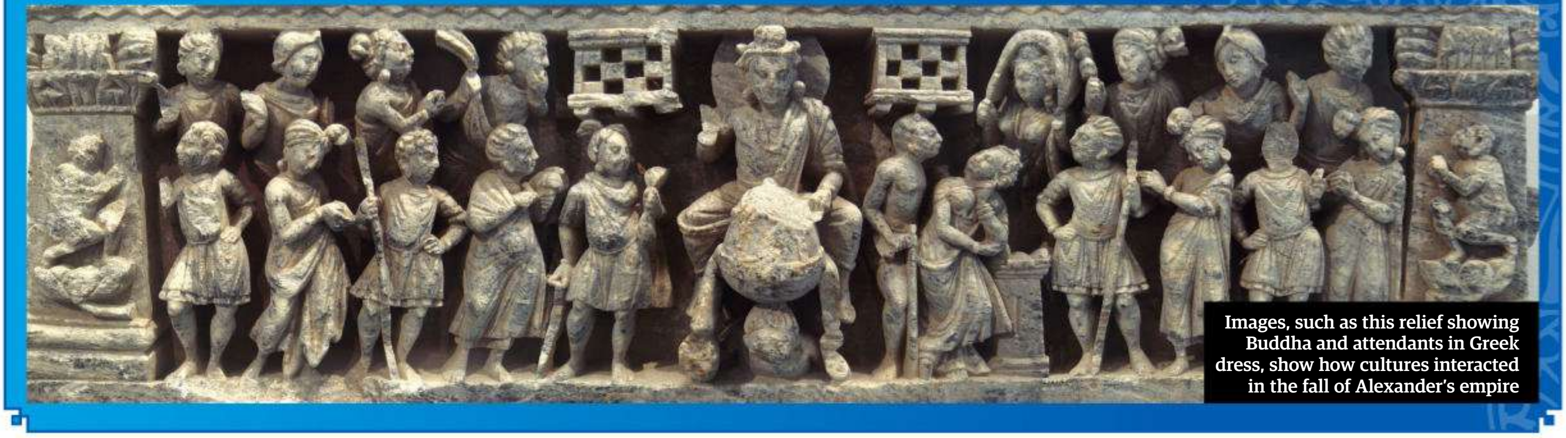
In Afghanistan near Kandahar an inscription by the Indian emperor Ashoka is carved into rock. It's written in flawless Greek. Though the empire of Alexander had come to an end the effects could still be felt deep into Asia decades later.

## Greek art in Asia

### The culture of Alexander's followers had a very powerful influence on art in every culture it touched

Hellenistic culture, the culture of the Greeks that followed Alexander, had a powerful influence on art in all of the cultures it touched. With strong kingdoms such as that of Greco-Bactria developing from the splintering of the empire, there was a demand for Greek style art far from its native home. Kings such as Demetrius I of Bactria conquered areas of the Indian plains and on the Greek style coins he produced, which bear a realistic depiction of the king, he is shown wearing an elephant scalp as a symbol of his conquest of the area.

As well as an ethnically Greek royal family imposing Hellenistic styles on the upper classes, there remained large populations that held to their traditional ways of art. This created a mixing of styles in art. Images of the Trojan Horse have been found in Gandhara, and a sculpture of Atlas supporting the sky is shown on a Buddhist monument. It is perhaps in images of Buddha that the greatest Hellenistic influence can be seen. Originally represented symbolically, images of a human Buddha from the 2nd century BCE onwards tend to have Greek aspects. He is often shown wearing a Greek himation (light cloak), with a halo, and standing in the contrapposto position beloved of Greek sculptors.



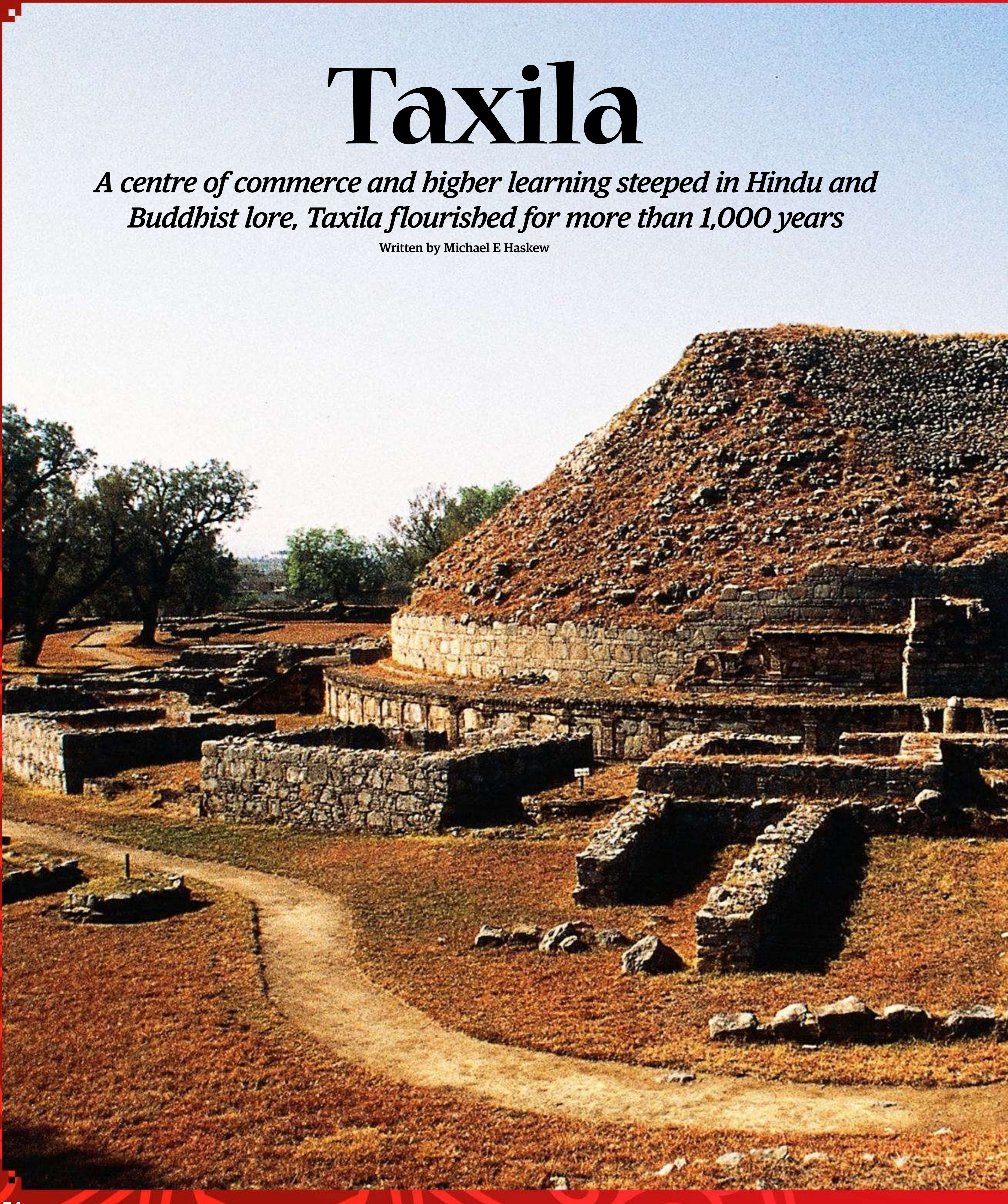
Images, such as this relief showing Buddha and attendants in Greek dress, show how cultures interacted in the fall of Alexander's empire

Image source: Wikimedia

# Taxila

*A centre of commerce and higher learning steeped in Hindu and Buddhist lore, Taxila flourished for more than 1,000 years*

Written by Michael E Haskew



**Although human habitation in the area dates to the Neolithic period more than 5,000 years ago, the life cycle of Taxila, its development, prosperity and decline, began in earnest with the emergence of trade across the known world in the 7th century BCE. Located at the convergence of three major trade routes, the city flourished.**

According to the Greek historian and explorer Megasthenes, these routes led from Kashmir and Central Asia, the western fringe of the Asian continent and east India, connecting Gandhara, or modern Kabul, Afghanistan, to the valley of the great Ganges river. Megasthenes referred to this route as the Royal Highway. The Indian Buddhist *Jataka Tales* include accounts of Taxila, calling the city the capital of the kingdom of Gandhara. Persian records from the 6th century BCE reference Taxila as a major city in the province of Gandhara, on the frontier of the empire. Also prominent in the historical record of Taxila is the writings of two Buddhist monks. Faxian took note of the bustling trade junction circa 450, while Hiuen Tsang recorded his impressions circa 630.

Located approximately 35 kilometres from the modern city of Rawalpindi and 30 kilometres from Islamabad, both positioned to the north west, the settlement's original Sanskrit name, Takasila, which translates as 'city of cut stone', was revised in Greco-Roman literature as Taxila. Also described as the ancient capital of eastern Punjab, the site is a fascinating archaeological treasure trove relating to several historical periods.

Image source: Getty Images

"Taxila may well be the site of the oldest known Hindu shrine in the world"

While evidence of early settlement predates 7th century BCE and indicates a thriving trade centre as early as 900 BCE, the pages of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* relate that Taxila was founded by Bharata, the younger brother of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana* and an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. Bharata named the city for his son, Taksha, whom he installed as its first ruler. Initially, the city was located on a site known as Bhir, a hill dominating the approaches of the Tamra Nala river, a tributary of the mighty Indus. As its cultural prominence grew, Taxila is believed to have been the place where a second Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, was first recited, while a university was established there that thousands travelled to in order to receive an education.

The archaeological record suggests that the early city was divided with a residential area to the east and a ceremonial or religious centre to the west. Archaeologists maintain that the discovery of a 'pillared hall' supports the theory of ceremonial purpose, indicating that Taxila may well be the site of the oldest known Hindu shrine in the world.

In 516 BCE, Persian King Darius waged a war of conquest in Central Asia. Occupying the region of Gandhara, surrounding Taxila, he proceeded to claim the Indus Valley and annexed the entire area, which apparently remained under Persian dominion for more than a century. However, there is little archaeological proof that actually supports this assertion.

As Alexander the Great and his Macedonian army moved inexorably east, invading India in 326 BCE, Persian influence had waned. King Ambhi, an Indian ruler of Taxila, was engaged in a dispute with a neighbouring monarch, Porus, who governed Pauravas, a region in east Punjab. Historical accounts differ as to whether Ambhi invited Alexander to enter his city or surrendered outright. Alexander allied with Ambhi temporarily and defeated Porus at the Battle of the Hydaspes on the banks of the Jhelum River, leading to Alexander's conquest of all of Punjab. Alexander then compelled the two rival kings to reconcile before leaving lieutenants and veterans of his army in India and returning to Babylon. At the time of the invasion, the Macedonians described Taxila as wealthy, prosperous and well governed.

After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, the Mauryan Empire, which dominated the Indian subcontinent for the following two centuries, took control of the Indus region. Ashoka, the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Empire, served as governor of Taxila during a period of Buddhist ascendance. Ashoka advocated the growth of the religion, and a pair of monasteries, replacing an older worship centre, was constructed. The stupa of the Dharmarajika monastery, a site where Ashoka buried a number of ancient Buddhist relics, remains a well-known landmark.

Greek King Demetrius invaded India in 184 BCE and established a 'second' Taxila at Sirkap across a stream from the original Bhir mound site. Sirkap was built according to Greek convention with neat buildings and defined streets running in a grid system. The polyglot population included Greeks, Iranians and Indians. Greek architectural influence mingled with those of the Hindu and Buddhist elements in the area. The Buddhist Apsidal temple measured 40 metres by 70 metres, while the Hindu Temple of the Sun and a Jainist sanctuary that resembled a stupa were nearby. The double-headed eagle stupa combined Buddhist and Greek design elements. A Greek temple and Buddhist stupa resembling a Roman temple were also built.

Periods of Sacastane and Parthian rule followed, and Parthian King Gondophares is said to have

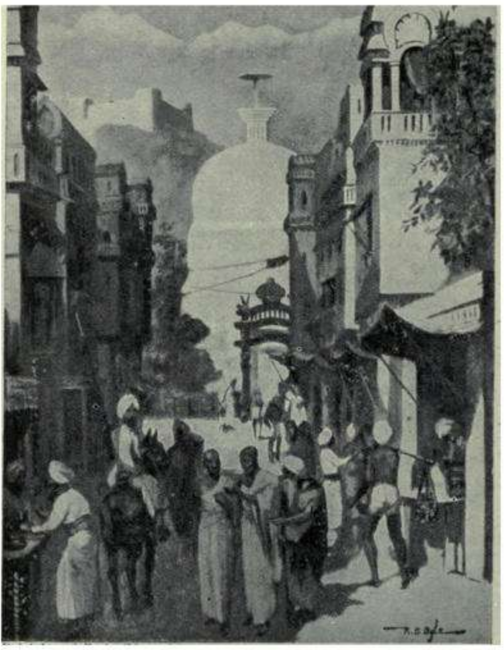


Image source: Alamy

Image source: Wiki

This striking interpretation of Buddha and his attendants resides in a Jaulian monastery at Taxila, and dates to the 5th century BCE

Image source: Getty Images

The Dharmarajika stupa was constructed as a burial structure by Buddhist inhabitants of Taxila in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. The Huns inflicted damage on the site in the 5th century, leading to it being abandoned

been baptised into the Christian faith by the Apostle Thomas, although the historical timeline indicates that the Parthian monarch lived before the time of Jesus Christ. Still, the tale indicates the religious diversity that characterised Taxila. During this period, the Greek philosopher Apollonius of Tyana visited the city and wrote it was as large as Nineveh, enclosed with Greek-style defensive positions, and its civil layout was similar to Athens.

The third incarnation of Taxila, known as Sirsukh, occurred under Kushan rule around 80 CE. A wall, some six metres thick in places, provided protection against invaders. Around 400, Taxila was absorbed into the Gupta Empire, and the Hephthalites and Sveta Huna, two of several Hunnish tribes of central Asia invaded during this period. Although these 'Huns' were eventually driven back, the war was so costly that the city of Taxila was unable to regain its previous status. The Huns heavily damaged the stately Buddhist structures in the city, and the population fled. By the mid 7th century, most of the population had abandoned the city and as trade routes were established elsewhere, Taxila became a backwater and faded into obscurity. When Buddhist monk Hiuen Tsang visited, he described it as "desolate."

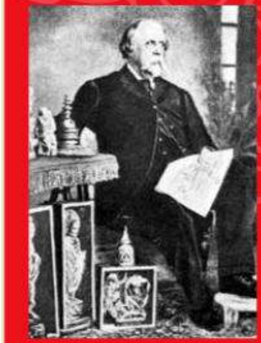
> "Taxila was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980 mainly for the ruins of the four settlement sites"

During the early 19th century, scholars determined that Taxila's ruins held tremendous historical value. In 1863, Sir Alexander Cunningham began extensive research, discovering that errors in ancient texts had incorrectly placed its location. Correcting the error, Cunningham positively identified Taxila, and the rediscovery was underway. Early excavations were supervised by Sir John Hubert Marshall. Among the sites that have been identified are the Bhir mound, the remains of Sirkap and Sirsukh, the Dharmarajika stupa, and at least a dozen others. Artefacts have been recovered, identified and displayed in a museum, and Taxila has become the most visited tourist attraction in Pakistan. However, the site remains remote. UNESCO designated Taxila a World Heritage Site in 1980, but it is threatened by vandals, plunderers, the ravages of war, and modern encroachment. The World Heritage Fund has noted that Taxila is one of a dozen sites across the globe on the verge of irreparable damage or loss.

Image source: Getty Images

## Discovery and preservation at Taxila

### Sir Alexander Cunningham, the theorist



In 1861, during the British Raj, Sir Alexander Cunningham was appointed archaeological surveyor to the Indian government. Taxila was among a dozen ancient cities that he positively identified. After returning to Britain, he journeyed to India each winter, participated in the excavations at Taxila and at other sites, and went on to produce 24 reports on their progress.

### Marshall makes dig discoveries

Director general of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1902 to 1928, Sir John Hubert Marshall began a 20-year excavation program at Taxila in 1913. He laid the foundation stone for the Taxila Museum in 1918. Today visitors to the museum can view many artefacts that were discovered during Marshall's tenure.

### UNESCO seeks preservation

UNESCO
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Formed in 1946, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is dedicated to improving the human condition through science, education, sustainable development and other endeavours, such as the preservation of historical sites. Regional and cultural history projects have brought much-needed attention to the threatened cultural treasures situated around the world.

Images source: Wiki

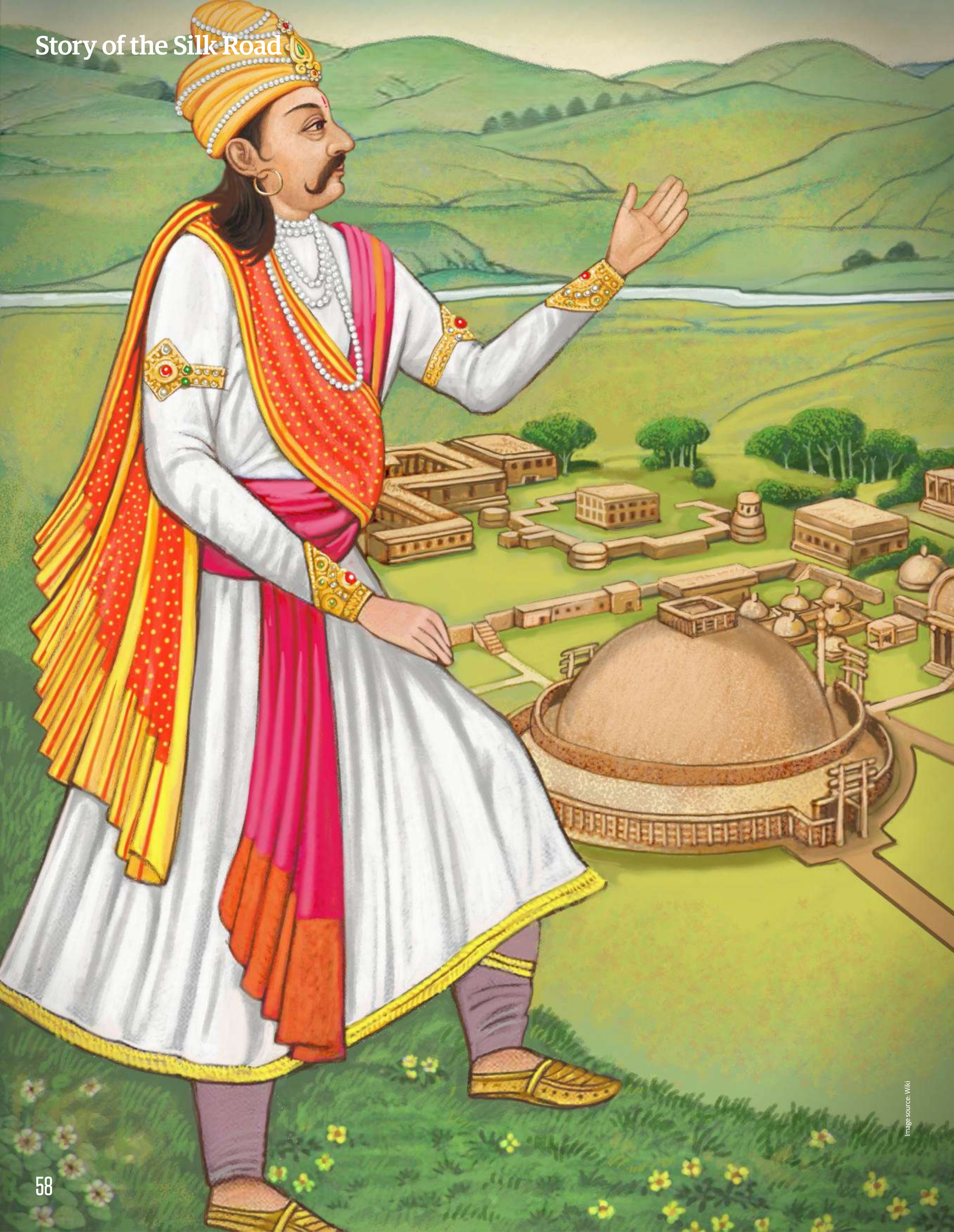


Image source: Wiki

# India's philosopher king

## *While Ashoka began his reign as a bloodthirsty conqueror, he soon had a change of heart, creating the world's first welfare state*

**Written by Hareth Al Bustani**

**At the start of his long reign, India's King Ashoka seemed destined to become one of history's great conquerors. Instead, having spilled vast quantities of blood to seize and expand his realm, he did something far more remarkable – he disavowed violence.**

The move was all the more spectacular considering his lineage. His grandfather, Chandragupta, was a force to be reckoned with. A brilliant warrior, Chandragupta commanded a mercenary band in the service of Alexander the Great, before overthrowing India's Nanda kingdom and establishing his own dynasty, the Maurya, in 322 BCE. He went on to unite the subcontinent's north and west, kicking the Macedonians out – with an army of 600,000 men, 8,000 elephants and 30,000 cavalry – and ruling over the subcontinent's greatest empire for a quarter of a century. The Jains say he abdicated the throne to his son, before fasting himself to death.

Indian society was governed by an increasingly rigid caste system, topped by the Brahman class of Vedic priests. Though Chandragupta was born to one of the lower castes, he filled his court with Brahman. His son, Bindusara, went on to subjugate the subcontinent's south, cutting through the Deccan plateau, into Mysore – earning himself the nickname 'Enemy-Slayer'. Although he failed to capture the kingdom of Kalinga to the east, he was said to have fathered 101 children, naming his eldest son, Sushima, his heir. One of his numerous dalliances resulted in a boy named Ashoka, a child who seemed set for a life of misery and obscurity. Not only did he suffer from a skin condition that left him "rough and unpleasant to touch", but he was prone to fainting and fits of epilepsy.

> *"Ashoka's early years were ruled with an iron fist, as he received daily briefings from an elaborate, far-reaching intelligence network of spies"*

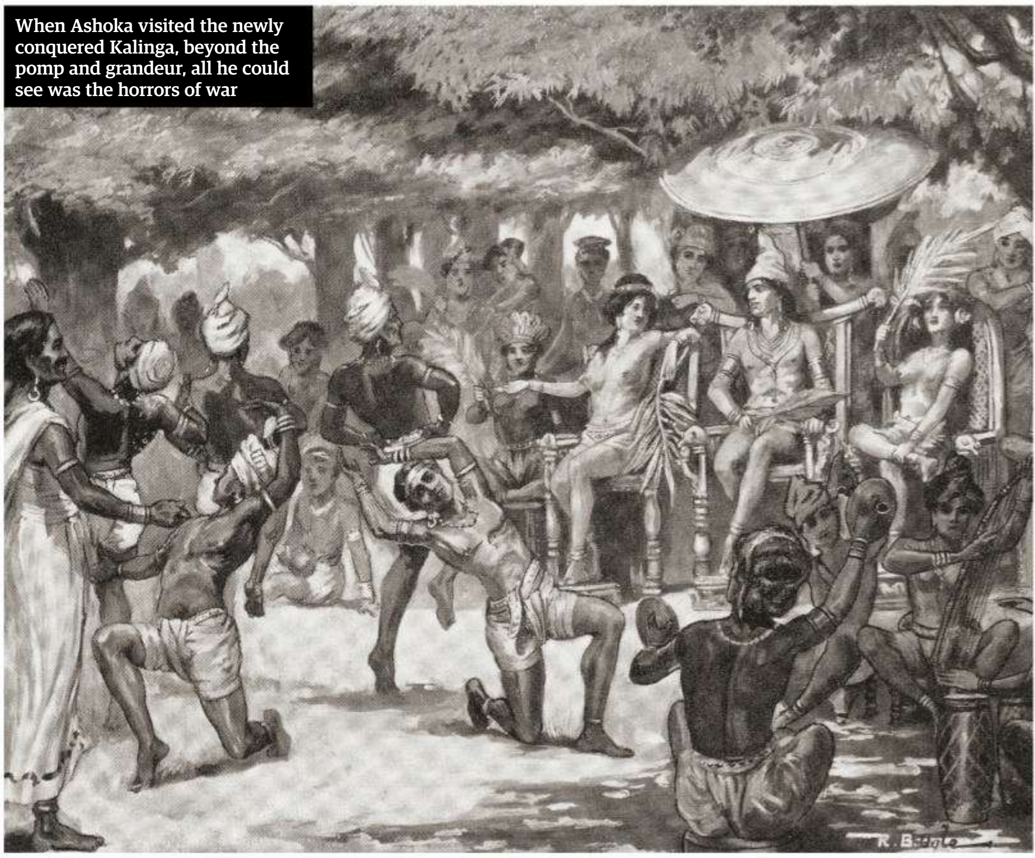

When Ashoka visited the newly conquered Kalinga, beyond the pomp and grandeur, all he could see was the horrors of war

Image source: Alamy

His afflictions made him a wicked youth, supposedly burning his entire harem alive after hearing them gossiping about his skin. Short and stout, he depended entirely on his wits, making an ally of his father's chief minister, with whom he schemed against his brothers. Eager to put these skills to good use and keep his son at arm's length, the king sent Ashoka, now known as 'the Wrathful', to put down a rebellion in the northwestern province of Taxila.

Receiving a hero's welcome, Ashoka went on to forge alliances with two mountain leaders of Kashmir – so successfully, his father named him the viceroy of Ujjain. There, he met a merchant's daughter called Devi, a committed Buddhist, and defied convention by marrying her for love, rather than prestige. Back in the capital, the prodigious heir Sushima had caused an uproar by slapping a senior minister on the back of his bald head, for comedic effect. Fearing the fickle whims of the future king, the courtiers had his rival claimant Ashoka recalled to the capital. Leaving his lowly wife and children behind, Ashoka returned and married Asandhimitra, from a small kingdom north of modern Delhi, naming her his chief queen. Sushima, meanwhile, was sent to suppress another revolt in Taxila.

In 274 BCE, the king fell gravely ill and ordered Sushima to return, instructing Ashoka to take his place. Desperate to remain in the capital at this critical juncture, Ashoka feigned sickness, and had the chief minister intercept the message to Sushima. Incensed, Ashoka then confronted his father, demanding he be named regent in a manner so shocking, the emperor supposedly fell into an epileptic fit and died. When Sushima finally arrived at the capital, he found his half-brother defended by a wall of Greek mercenaries. According to the Mahayana Buddhist account, the chief minister dug a ditch within the eastern gate, filled it with coals and covered it with reeds and dirt, before egging the crown prince on, encouraging him to seize his throne. As Sushima rushed into the unguarded eastern gate, he tripped into the fiery hole, enduring a slow, painful demise.

In the ensuing four years, legend tells how Ashoka killed his remaining 98 half-brothers one-by-one, sparing only his uterine sibling, Vitashoka. Having finally wiped out all other male heirs, he enjoyed the rites of coronation. During the ritual, he was cleansed, anointed and consecrated by Brahman priests, emerging as a king with divine authority. Now he was the physical embodiment of Dharma itself – the cosmic truth. Adopting his grandfather's title, Devanampriya, 'Beloved of the gods', and the regnal name Priyadasi, or 'Beloved to behold', he appointed his younger brother vice-regent. The emperor would go on to take six wives and scores of concubines, fathering 14 children.

He took quickly to leadership, assessing the affairs of the realm, receiving gold revenues, appointing officials, writing letters, overseeing military exercises and even going hunting. He nominated four princes to serve as viceroys, overseeing the district officers, mahamatras – who, in turn, managed a further group of subordinates. Cities, meanwhile, were run by commissioners with judicial powers.

Ashoka's early years were ruled with an iron fist, as he received daily briefings from an elaborate, far-reaching intelligence network of spies. One account tells of how he built a 'Hell Prison', which looked beautiful on the outside, but was filled with the 'five great agonies' of Hell. He allegedly appointed a man called Chandagirika his chief executioner, tasking him with killing people by all manner of depraved tortures, only to later have him tortured to death.

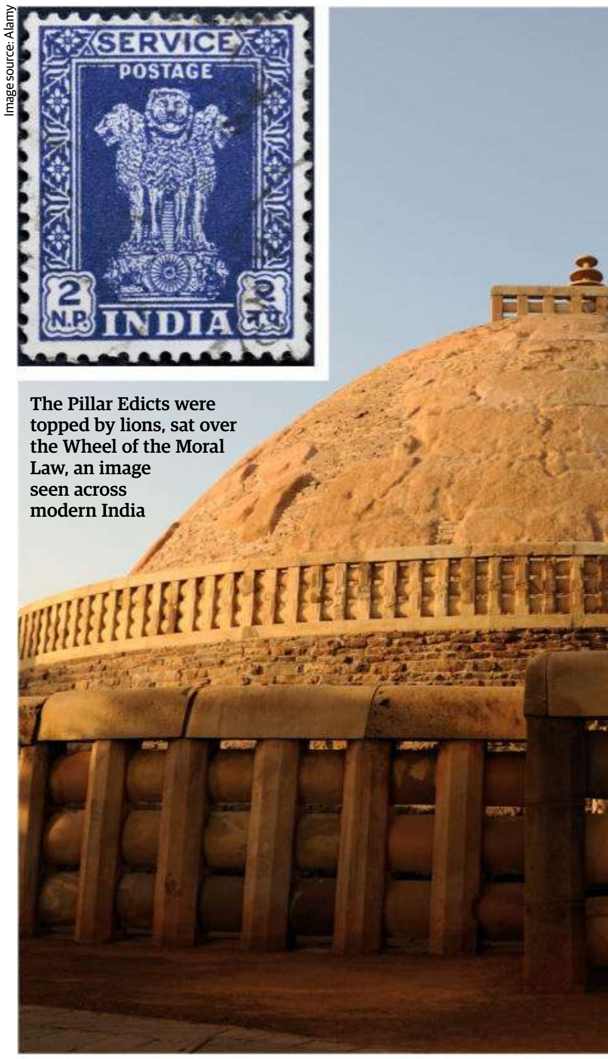


Image source: Alamy

The Pillar Edicts were topped by lions, sat over the Wheel of the Moral Law, an image seen across modern India

## The original Machiavelli

### The Mauryan dynasty began with a genius, determined to deliver his empire from danger, and hell-bent on revenge

Chanakya was born to a Brahman family in the northwestern province of Taxila – a centre of culture and learning where the finest studied science, economics, law, medicine and warfare.

A teacher's son, the genius became a professor himself at a young age, and his study of politics led him to believe that India's Nanda kingdom was in a dangerously vulnerable state. In the event of an invasion, he worried the entire realm would soon collapse. Desperate, he travelled east to the capital of Pataliputra, to advise the Nanda king, only to find him a manipulative tyrant. The experiment ended in disaster, with Chanakya fleeing disguised as a Jain ascetic – eventually coming across a brash young boy called Chandragupta.

Taking the young lad under his wing, he gave him a holistic education, hoping to mould him into the ideal ruler. As the two amassed financial support, they mounted a direct attack on the Nanda, failing spectacularly. Soon after, the duo watched a mother scold her son for eating the hot centre of a bun, rather than the cool edges – prompting a change in strategy. Shoring up allies in the Himalayas, they attacked the outskirts of the kingdom, slowly carving it up piece by piece, before eventually taking the capital itself and sending the Nanda king fleeing. Thereafter, Chandragupta was appointed king, creating the Maurya dynasty and ruling in the mould of Chanakya's design. Chanakya, nicknamed Kautilya or 'the Crow Like', went on to pen *Arthashastra*, 'Treatise on State Economy', outlining his theories on statehood, rulership, political economy and international relations – ideas that would survive well into the British Raj.

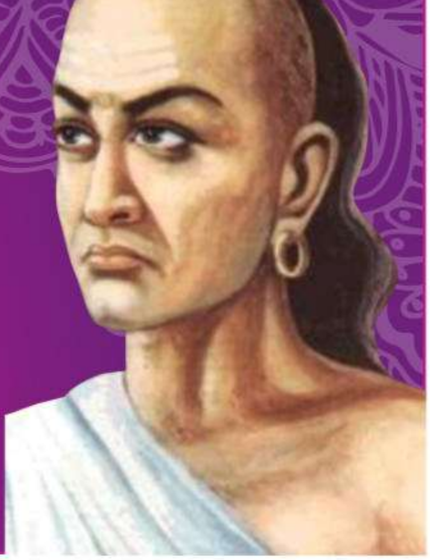
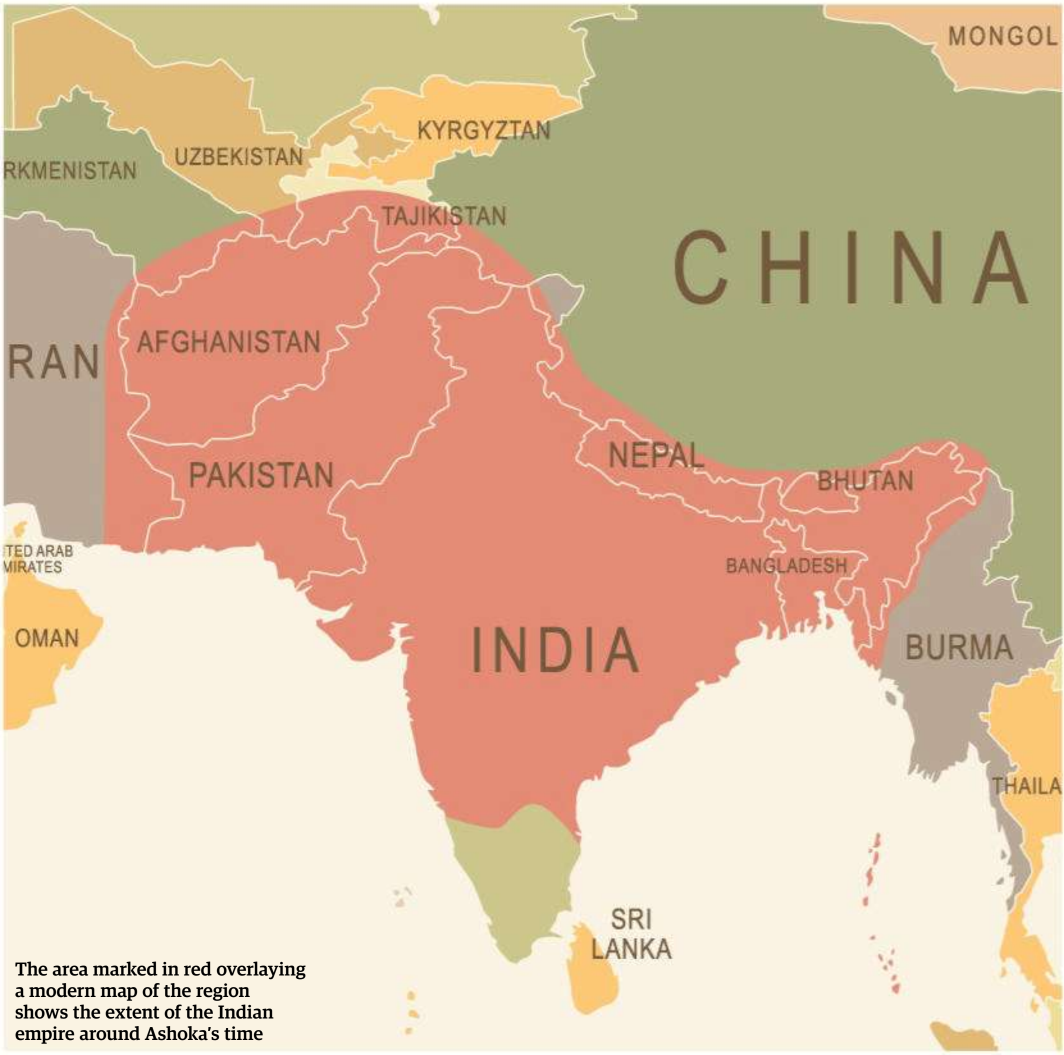


Image source: Alamy

Ashoka was said to have erected 84,000 stupas and monasteries across the subcontinent, and he built them to last

Image source: Getty Images



The area marked in red overlaying a modern map of the region shows the extent of the Indian empire around Ashoka's time

Image source: Getty Images

Although he loved meat, and particularly enjoyed eating peacock, in 265 BCE – whether under the influence of his mother, his first wife or a young monk who miraculously survived his 'Hell' – the tyrannical, bloodthirsty Ashoka converted to Buddhism. It was a political masterstroke – one that would allow him to further whittle away the influence of the Brahman caste, by simply transitioning their authority away to the humble Buddhists.

He immediately began replacing the 60,000 Brahman on his payroll with 60,000 Buddhist monks – who saw their ranks swell with Brahman converts. However, it would be a few years before he took his new faith seriously enough to give up his beloved peacock meat. During this transition, in his eighth year in power, eager to accomplish what his father could not, the king went against the tenets of his newfound faith and invaded the unconquered eastern kingdom of Kalinga.

The ensuing war would prove far bloodier than he could have imagined. Although the king succeeded in subjugating and drawing Kalinga within his yoke, 100,000 were killed in the violence, and 150,000 displaced. Even amidst the glory of conquest, as he toured his new province, littered with corpses and ruins, the human toll shocked Ashoka to his core. Rather than pride, he simply felt grief and shame.

Hurling himself deeper into Buddhism, he disavowed violence, and began a second phase of leadership, 'Ashoka Dharma'. He commemorated this transformation in 260 BCE, with a public display of piety, inscribing the first of many 'Rock Edicts', pronouncing his conversion to Buddhism. These would later culminate in the Pillar Edicts, inscribed pillars of magnificent polished stone, crowned by lions, bulls and elephants, sat atop the Wheel of Moral Law.

> "He was said to have built 84,000 stupas and monasteries across the realm, one for each of the Buddhist discourses"

The king sometimes spent three quarters of the year touring the empire, inscribing rock faces in the subcontinent's first written script, Brahmi, which was developed to communicate his mother tongue of Prakrit. This gave him the means to speak directly with every single one of his subjects. In the process, he delivered a fascinating array of philosophical, heartfelt musings – unfiltered and raw, a far cry from the modern politician's carefully scripted and sanitised public statement.

One of his rocks directly expressed remorse for the invasion of Kalinga, lamenting: "Peasants who behave with humility towards their friends, servants and labourers are killed in wars and separated from their loved ones". The king added, "This has distressed me considerably. Why should this happen?" He then vowed to eschew thoughts of war and direct all his energies to Dharma going forwards, encouraging future generations to do the same. "The triumph of Dharma is superior to the triumph of war," he opined.

As he became consumed by his Buddhist faith, this idea of Dharma would become a leading tenet of his leadership going forwards. Curiously, he sought not to enforce the Buddhist notion of Dharma upon the empire, but to create a society governed by a universal force of mutual respect and kindness – or as he put it, "All men are my children". It was a system of civic ethics, rather than a state religion. In one edict, he denounced the "meaningless rituals", synonymous with Brahmanic worship, instead encouraging people to adopt rituals and customs of "respect for elders" and "treating all living creatures well" – including slaves and labourers.

He insisted that "there should be restraint in preaching one's faith", adding that "a person who praises his own faith and derides the faith of others is actually bringing his faith into disrepute". After all, Buddha himself had said it was behaviour, not birth, that determined whether one was a "priest or an outcast". While all this served to disgust the Brahman, nothing enraged them so much as his edict denouncing the sacrifice of animals. In the statement, Ashoka even confessed that while his royal kitchens still killed two peacocks and a deer every day to make curry, these too would soon be spared.

During this new phase of governance, Ashoka's political administration largely resembled that of his grandfather. His mahamatras travelled across the empire five times a year, making sure neither senior nor lower ranking officials were abusing their posts. When Ashoka's own brother was caught taking liberties with his vice-regency, he was forced to resign, and become a Buddhist hermit. Ashoka also had various officials and employees on the payroll, collecting taxes from peasants, artisans and merchants, and holding lawbreakers to account. He was firm but fair; not only abolishing the death penalty, but offering amnesty on his birthday and the anniversary of his coronation, releasing certain prisoners.

> *"Even amidst the glory of conquest, as he toured his new province, littered with corpses and ruins, the human toll shocked Ashoka to his core"*

In 254 BCE, the king sent a minister to mediate a dispute between Buddhists and the Nirgrantha, a sect of Jain ascetics who refused to even wear clothes. When the minister was killed, Ashoka called together the Third Buddhist Council at his capital of Pataliputra, to streamline the various Buddhist sects and codify what was considered doctrinally correct. He then began a widespread programme of proselytising – sending monks across the region, bearing the accepted doctrine.

As he grew older, Ashoka became increasingly dedicated to the Sangha, the Buddhist community. He was said to have built 84,000 stupas and monasteries across the realm, one for each of the Buddhist discourses. Rather than mud and plaster, they were built to last – of brick and stone. He supposedly gifted 100,000 gold pieces to every monastery, another 100,000 to the site of Buddha's birth, and a further 100,000 to the Bodhi tree where Buddha received enlightenment.

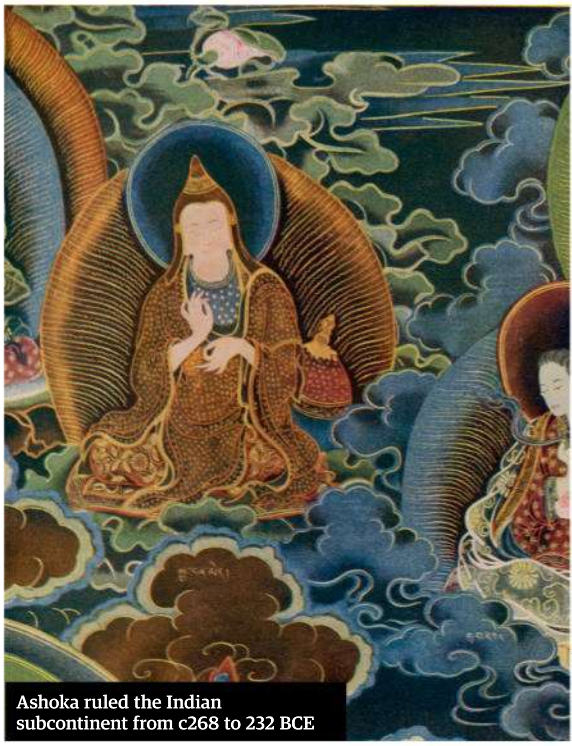
The king also revived the magnificent Pancavarsika festival, reimagining it in line with his Buddhist faith. At the end of the proceedings, he erected a platform around the Bodhi tree and poured milk over it, infused with sandalwood, saffron, camphor and perfume, from 5,000 gold, silver, crystal and tiger's-eye pitchers.

After the king's chief queen and mother of his beloved heir, Kunala, died, her spot was filled by Tishyarakshita – a Machiavellian anti-Buddhist, who had supposedly once tried to destroy the Bodhi tree. Either angered at Kunala for rejecting a sexual advance, or simply hoping to elevate her own son, she supposedly doctored one of the king's orders, having his heir blinded – while he was, in an all too predictable predicament, putting down a rebellion in Taxila. When Kunala clawed his way back to the capital, sans eyes, the chief minister had the queen killed, and her anti-Buddhist conspirators executed or banished to the desert. Ineligible for the crown now he was blind, Kunala's son Samprati was named heir in his stead.

As Ashoka neared his seventies, and his health began to fail, he sustained himself by planning a second Pancavarsika festival, one that would far surpass the first – spending 400,000 gold pieces entertaining 400,000 monks, and even more for his Ashokarama monastic centre. However, decades of philanthropic spending had virtually bankrupted the empire, and the king's ministers leaned on the young Samprati – who told the treasury to reject Ashoka's request. Denied his dying wish, to donate all his remaining worldly goods to the Buddhist community, Ashoka slipped away from rulership, effectively abdicating by allowing Samprati to act in his name – before dying in 233 BCE.

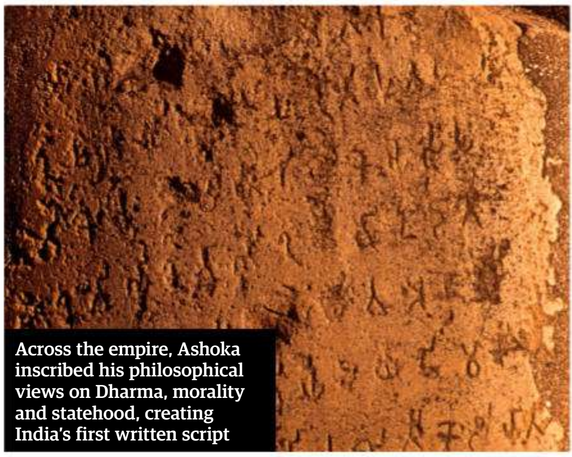
The king's death would be followed by another troubled succession, with a line of short-reigning kings ushering in the dynasty's demise, and the return of Brahmanism just half a century later. Though Buddhism would eventually fade from the subcontinent, it informed the future Hindu faith, with Buddha serving as one of Vishnu's avatars. It would also find fertile ground in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, China and beyond. Of the two symbols that adorned Ashoka's Pillar Edicts, the Bodhi tree and the Wheel of the Moral Law, the latter has been immortalised on the modern Indian flag.

It is a fitting tribute to a man, who not only presided over the largest ever Indian empire for three decades, but transformed a minor sect into a major world religion, successfully demonstrating an entirely new model of leadership – one based not on conquest, but universal welfare.



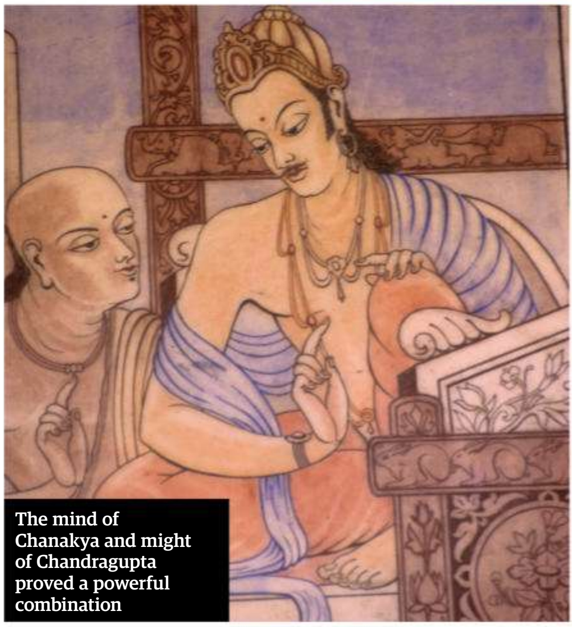
Ashoka ruled the Indian subcontinent from c268 to 232 BCE

Image source: Alamy



Across the empire, Ashoka inscribed his philosophical views on Dharma, morality and statehood, creating India's first written script

Image source: Getty Images



The mind of Chanakya and might of Chandragupta proved a powerful combination

Image source: Alamy

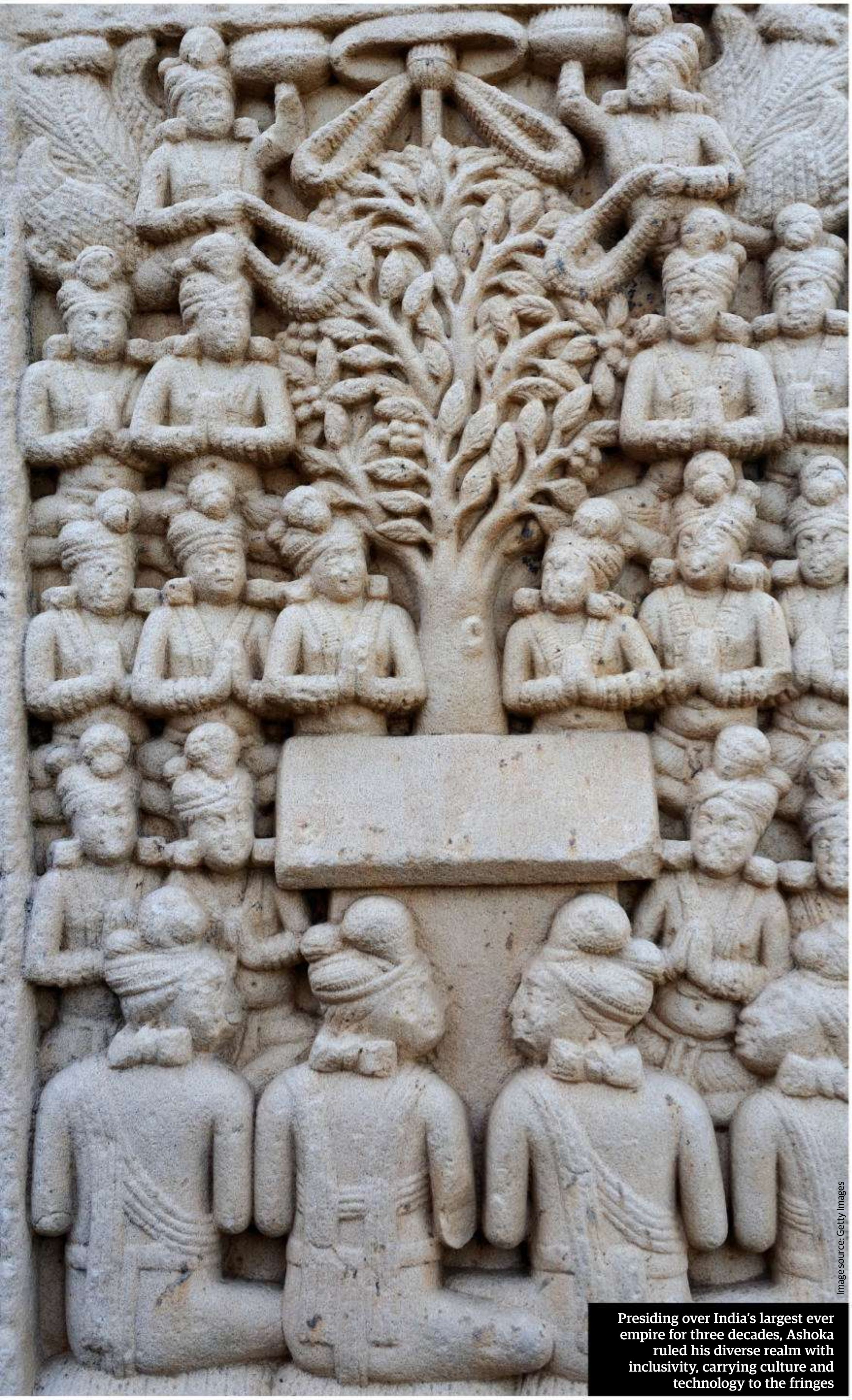


Image source: Getty Images

Presiding over India's largest ever empire for three decades, Ashoka ruled his diverse realm with inclusivity, carrying culture and technology to the fringes

# The wide reach of civilisation

## Ashoka's philanthropy blossomed across the fringes of the empire, rolling out remarkable developments

Set along the Ganges, the Maurya capital of Pataliputra was one of the largest cities in the world, perhaps even larger than Rome, and was a city brimming with palaces, factories, shipyards, gardens and temples – all enclosed within enormous walls, with 570 towers and 64 gates.

However, the empire proper was enormous, spanning an incredible array of cultures and landscapes – most of it far less sophisticated than the capital. With large swathes of the land covered in dense forest, littered with backwater villages, one of the king's most influential moves was his introduction of Dharma mahamatras, or superintendents of morals. This new breed of officers were tasked with rolling out the king's vision of Dharma on the ground, maintaining peace between the sects, digging wells, running hospitals and building shade alongside the road.

They were sent to the furthest reaches of the empire, teaching the tribes about Dharma, and bringing with them the high culture and technology of the Ganges Basin, the heart of Maurya power. In the process, the peasants were 'civilised': brought into the fold of tax-paying society, with a respect for royal authority and Ashoka's monks, officers and priests. The king claimed that through his efforts, many hunters and fishermen were converted to more settled, potentially wealthier, agriculturists.

Before long, black-polished pottery, writing, iron tools and spoked wheels were carried to the distant provinces. Burnt bricks would emerge for the first time in northeast India, a material that could withstand heavy rain, and therefore allow settlements to be built where mud shacks previously could not. Ring wells, meanwhile, allowed people to live further and further from the river banks. Having communicated his philosophies to the rulers of Greece, Egypt, Turkey and Sri Lanka, the king even offered medical support to neighbouring countries.

# Trading faiths on the Silk Road

## *Religions can often clash and cause conflicts, but the Silk Road allowed them to meet and exchange ideas peacefully*

**Written by Ben Gazur**

**The Silk Road was not only a fantastic way to transport goods across a continent, it also allowed ideas to spread and mingle. Though it may have been rare for any one person to cover the entire route, texts and cult objects could project a religion far beyond its homeland. Some scholars see Indian influence in the notion of reincarnation that underpinned much of Platonic and Pythagorean philosophies, for instance.**

It can be hard to trace ideas and pin them decisively to passage along the Silk Road, but there are plenty of artefacts that show a definite spread of religions. Where religious people mix, you often find an exchange of ideas and the creation of new traditions that merge features from one or more faith - syncretism.

As well as individual gods and representations of the divine, big ideas like monotheism could be transmitted along the Silk Road. A Persian sage called Zoroaster is credited with creating the first truly monotheistic faith. Zoroastrianism spread into the West and influenced many religions. The many gods of the early Hebrew texts were slowly reduced to a single all-powerful deity. A later follower of Zoroaster called Mani created his own religion, Manichaeism, by uniting aspects of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

> *"As well as individual gods… big ideas like monotheism could be transmitted along the Silk Road"*

The Sogdians of Central Asia were key traders on the Silk Road. Sogdian became a language of commerce along the trade routes, and many of the key texts of Buddhism coming from India were translated into Sogdian. It was from these Sogdian translations that much Buddhist literature reached China. Given its central position on the Silk Road, Sogdia was home to Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Manicheans and Nestorian Christians.

Objects found along the Silk Road show all of these influences and more. The Bimaran Casket is a golden reliquary that shows Buddha flanked by Hindu deities. The Kanishka Casket contains iconography that has Buddha being worshipped by the Hindu gods Brahma and Indra, while the Iranian gods of the Sun and Moon look on. The scene also shows cherubic figures of a type found in Classical Roman and Greek religious artistic representations.

Smaller objects not made from precious materials could also cover thousands of miles. From Europe to China, many religions make use of prayer beads. The faithful often use beads on a string to keep count of their prayers or to aid meditation. The earliest use of beads probably dates from Hindu use, mala beads, from which it passed into Buddhism and spread outwards into regions undreamed of by their original users.

Prayer beads known as Japa Mala from India were adopted in many other faiths as they moved along the Silk Road

Image source: Wiki; Gary Lee Todd

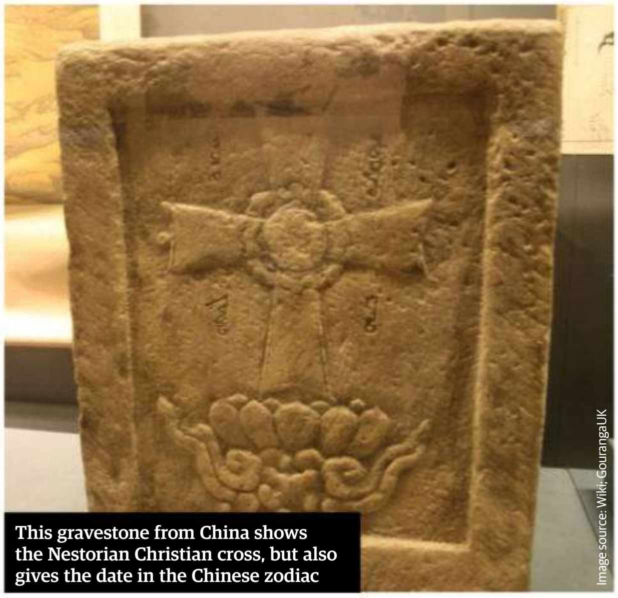
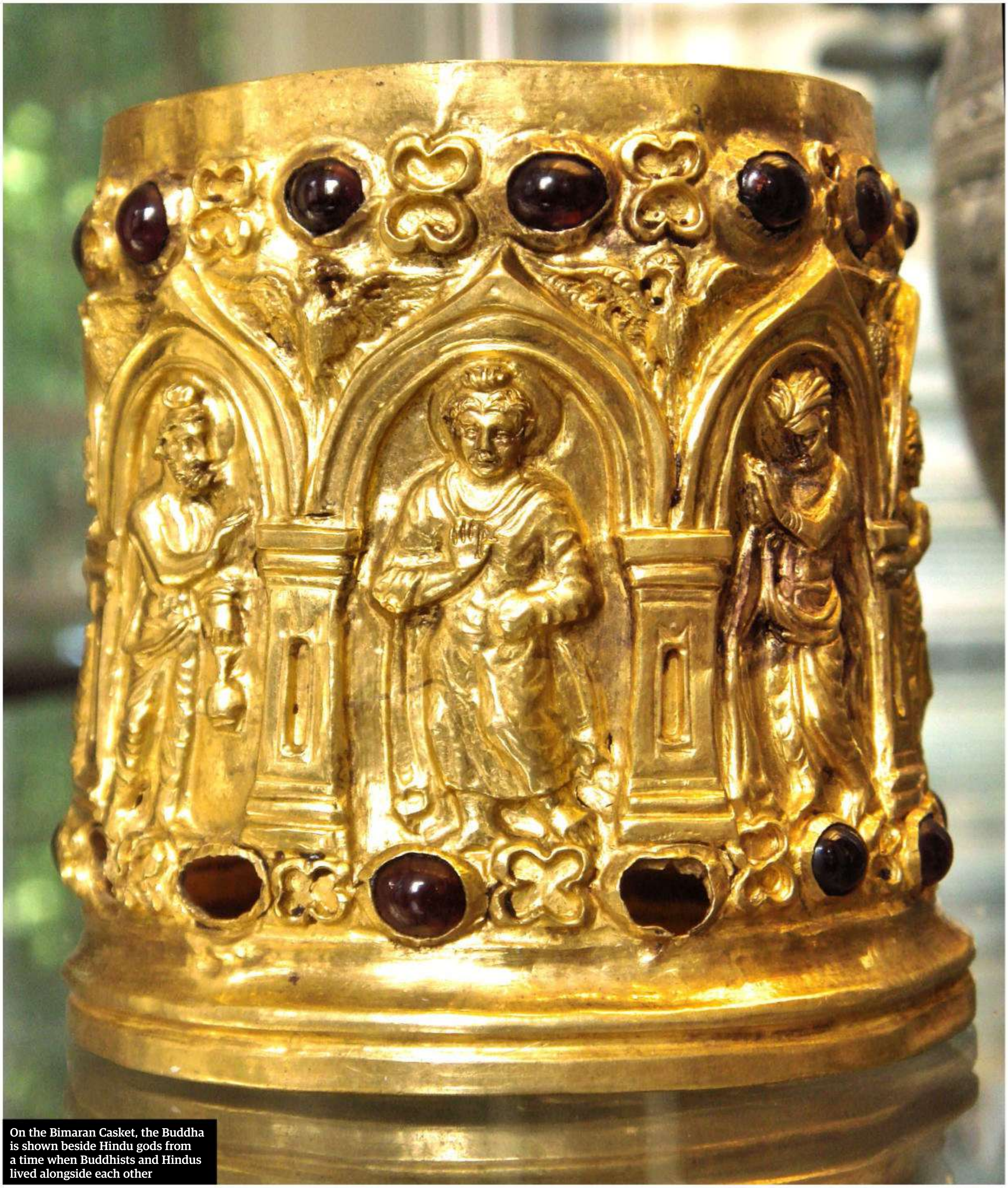
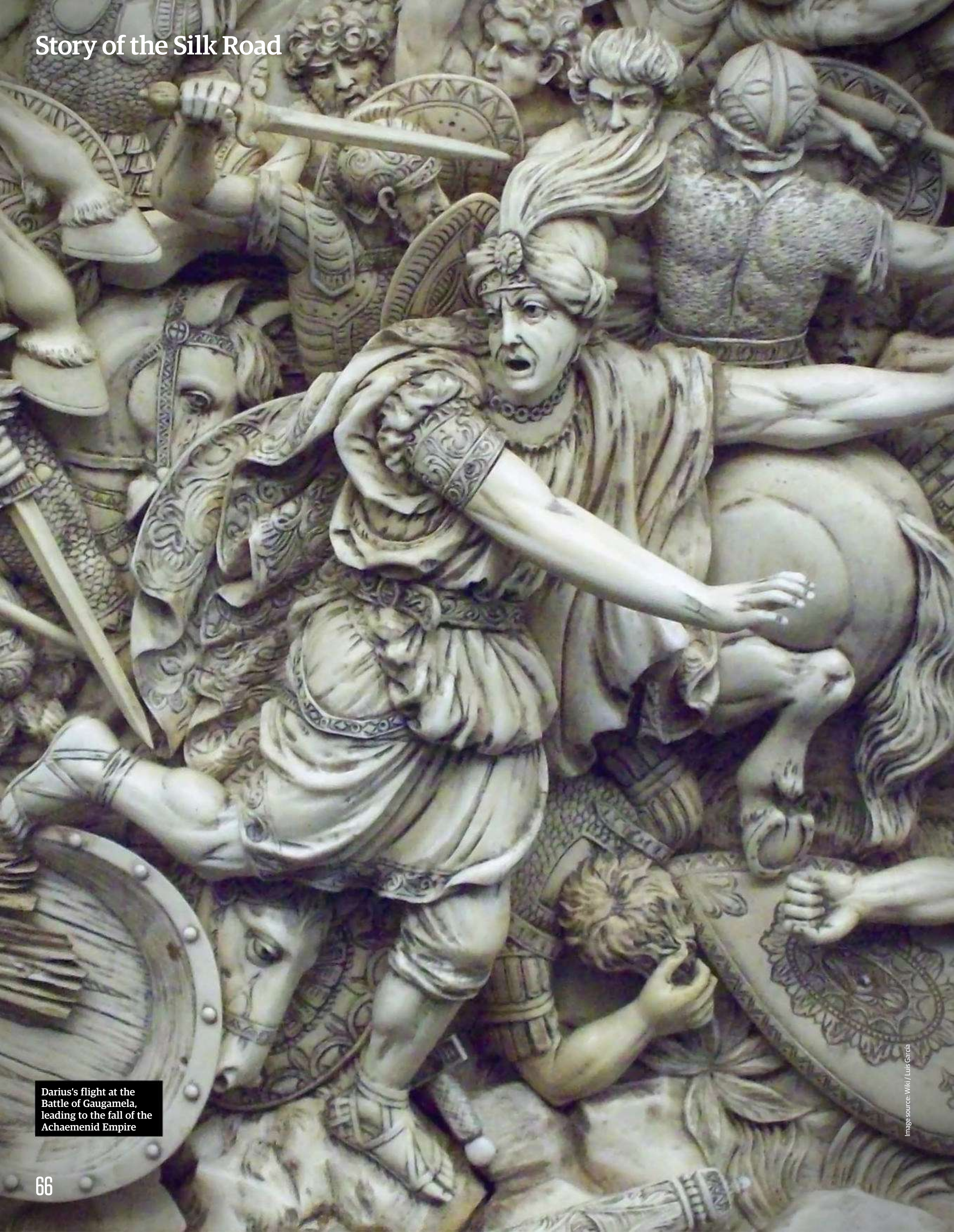

This gravestone from China shows the Nestorian Christian cross, but also gives the date in the Chinese zodiac

Image source: Wiki; GourangaUK



On the Bimaran Casket, the Buddha is shown beside Hindu gods from a time when Buddhists and Hindus lived alongside each other



Darius's flight at the Battle of Gaugamela, leading to the fall of the Achaemenid Empire

Image source: Wiki / Luis García

# Silk in the classical Old World

*Silk was a coveted luxury in the classical Old World, a symbol of wealth and power, and a commodity that was set to change the face of Eurasia forever*

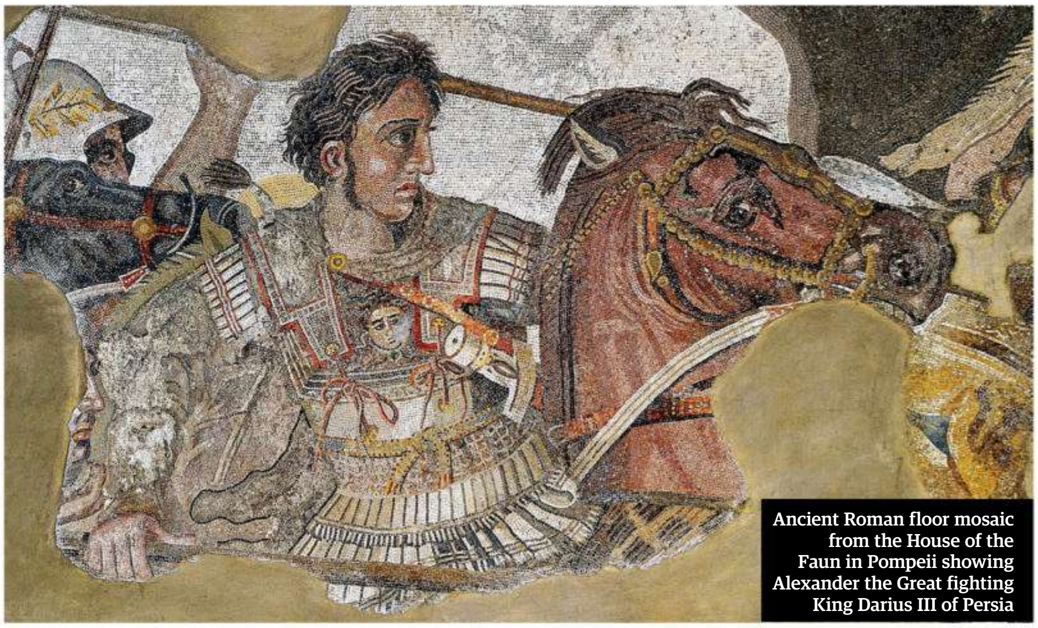
Written by Dee Dee Chainey

**Over 2000 years ago, a great network of trade routes spread across the world from China, through Central Asia, to Byzantium – or Constantinople – and beyond, across the Mediterranean Sea. These routes were a trade network, connecting the East and West; a path of weaving new cultures and traditions through the landscape of the legendary cities of Samarkand and Persepolis. Tales of its great cities and exotic sites travelled with the traders who took its path. The Silk Road was a route that hailed the advent of sweeping changes to the nature of trade across the Old World. With the appearance of such a wide and easily accessed network – connecting trade hubs across Eurasia – both social and business transactions would never be the same again, sparking cultural change that advanced humanity beyond their previous ways of relating to the world around forever.**

The name itself is no accident. While the term 'the Silk Road' does not have ancient origins, first used by German geologist, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, in the mid-19th century, it is very fitting. The origins of the route were ingrained in the ancient need for the mysterious material coveted from shore to shore. While today we take silk for granted, in a world of coarse fabrics, silk was the height of luxury: soft, shimmering, beguiling, draping the pampered bodies of the rich across Eurasia. Manufactured using precise and age-old techniques, silk is made from the cocoon of the silkworm – these techniques were a coveted secret for centuries. It was a valued commodity, underpinning status, wealth, and beauty. Anyone who could afford such a luxurious material displayed their wealth to all, with the cloth underpinning their ability to control money, resources, and access to the highly skilled craftspeople with the knowledge to create luxury items from such an expensive material. The battle to control the techniques of silk production raged for centuries, with legendary leaders from Alexander the Great to the Emperor Constantine all playing a role in its history.

The story of silk fuelled the birth of the Silk Road, and from around 200 BCE to 1400 CE, it was not just a key product in trade, but also a catalyst for change that swept across Eurasia, leading to a melting pot of ideas, cultures and knowledge. The quest for silk along the Silk Road brought trade, commodities and ideas: it brought change itself. Yet the beginnings of silk are shrouded in mystery and folklore. While archaeological evidence of silk production goes back to Neolithic China in c.3600 BCE, legend tells that Leizu, the wife of the mythical Emperor Huangdi, was once drinking tea under a mulberry tree when a silk moth cocoon fell into her cup from the leaves above. As she took it out of the hot liquid, the silk unwound, covering all the trees in the garden with silk. For her role in its discovery, she was made into a goddess: the Silk Mother.

Soon, trade routes began to grow from the Chinese capital, and the longing for silk spread across the surrounding empires: to Persia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. China became a place known for its prosperity, creativity and invention; and



Ancient Roman floor mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii showing Alexander the Great fighting King Darius III of Persia

Image source: Wiki

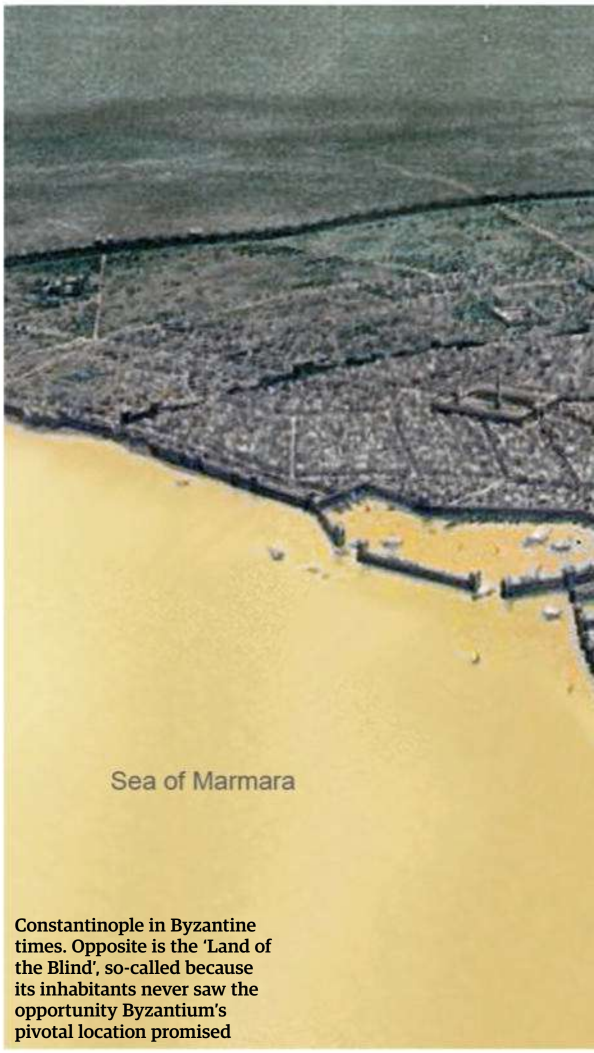
from this, a need to acquire their goods arose in other regions.

The Sogdians were an ancient Iranian group from around Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. They were the most prominent traders and middlemen of the Silk Road for more than 1000 years, trading the 1500 miles from Sogdiana to China, and as far as to Byzantium and India, carrying both goods and concepts that would change the West more dramatically than anything else: modern mathematics, astronomy, and science, leading to the Renaissance in later times. Their territory was fiercely contested during the rise of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, with the legendary Samarkand – the capital of the Sogdian satrapy – conquered by the Achaemenid Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BCE; then by the Macedonian Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE – meaning sections of the Silk Road moved from Persian control to Greek; and was later controlled by Genghis Khan, and then Timur. Samarkand was a key territory of the Silk Road, battled over for centuries, and the source of many of the Silk Road's key commodities, from trade goods like lapis lazuli and carnelian, which spread out from there to Persia and the West, to religions like Zoroastrianism. The Sogdians were renowned for their silk work, and later played a key part in the spread of silk technologies to the West.

In the 5th century BCE, the Silk Road ran from Susa in Persia, modern day Iran, all the way to Sardis, in modern-day Turkey, on the banks of the Aegean Sea. This part of the network was the Royal Road, rebuilt by the Persian king Darius I, and could be travelled in just nine days. Materials like gold, jade and, of course, silk were being traded along the routes, all the way to China, and with evidence of some of the goods making it all the way to Europe. It is said that Darius the Great extended the roads to all parts of the Empire, and he is credited with joining the East and the West. This led to a melting pot of cultures, and the wide spread of knowledge – both the Aramaic writing system and coin currency were introduced under Darius I.

During the time of Darius III, the fight to control these territories between the Achaemenid Empire against the forces of Alexander the Great caused a high level of instability across the Silk Road – a constant throughout the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods. Yet, Alexander the Great moved in on the East, conquering the heart of the Persian Empire, its capital Persepolis in 330 BCE, leading to the death of Darius III and changing the socio-cultural landscape for centuries.

Alexander the Great had played a key role around the Bosporus before this – the place where the East and West are said to meet – allowing his later conquest of the Middle East. Control of Byzantium was taken by the Persian Empire at the beginning of the 6th century BCE, returning to Greek control at the beginning of the 5th century CE. This was a critical point in the Silk Road's history, as whoever controlled the city and surrounding areas also controlled the trade routes between East and West – and therefore controlled the trade in silk. This was important for access to trade, and also to ensure that the taxes and charges levied were weighted in their favour, and routes were not blocked by opponents. Alexander the Great did just that, and by the time he was 30, his control stretched from Greece to India in the East – taking his culture with him.



Constantinople in Byzantine times. Opposite is the 'Land of the Blind', so-called because its inhabitants never saw the opportunity Byzantium's pivotal location promised

This green Roman glass cup was found in a tomb dating to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE) tomb, in Guangxi, China

## Trade on the Silk Road

### How rare goods connected the known world in ancient times

With the Roman access to the Silk Road land and sea routes after the 1st century, luxury goods arrived, never before seen in these regions. Gold and silver arrived from the Balkans, Anatolia, and Egypt. Fine silverware hailed from Persia. Woollen goods like carpets and blankets moved both to the Mediterranean and China from Central Asia, where knowledge of wool processing originated. Roman glass also found its way to far off places like the Korean Peninsula, prized for its quality and transparency. Grape seeds had been taken to China, which saw winemaking for the first time.

Justinian I was instrumental in widening the trade network. In the face of conflict with the Persians, he tried to find new trade routes through the East. Grain was a major commodity, and Justinian streamlined its passage by building a storage granary at Tenedos, a hub allowing onward transport to Constantinople.

Later, items like paper, printing technologies, and gunpowder also found their way along the Silk Road from China to the West, leading to sweeping changes, and turning the path of history irrevocably, forever.

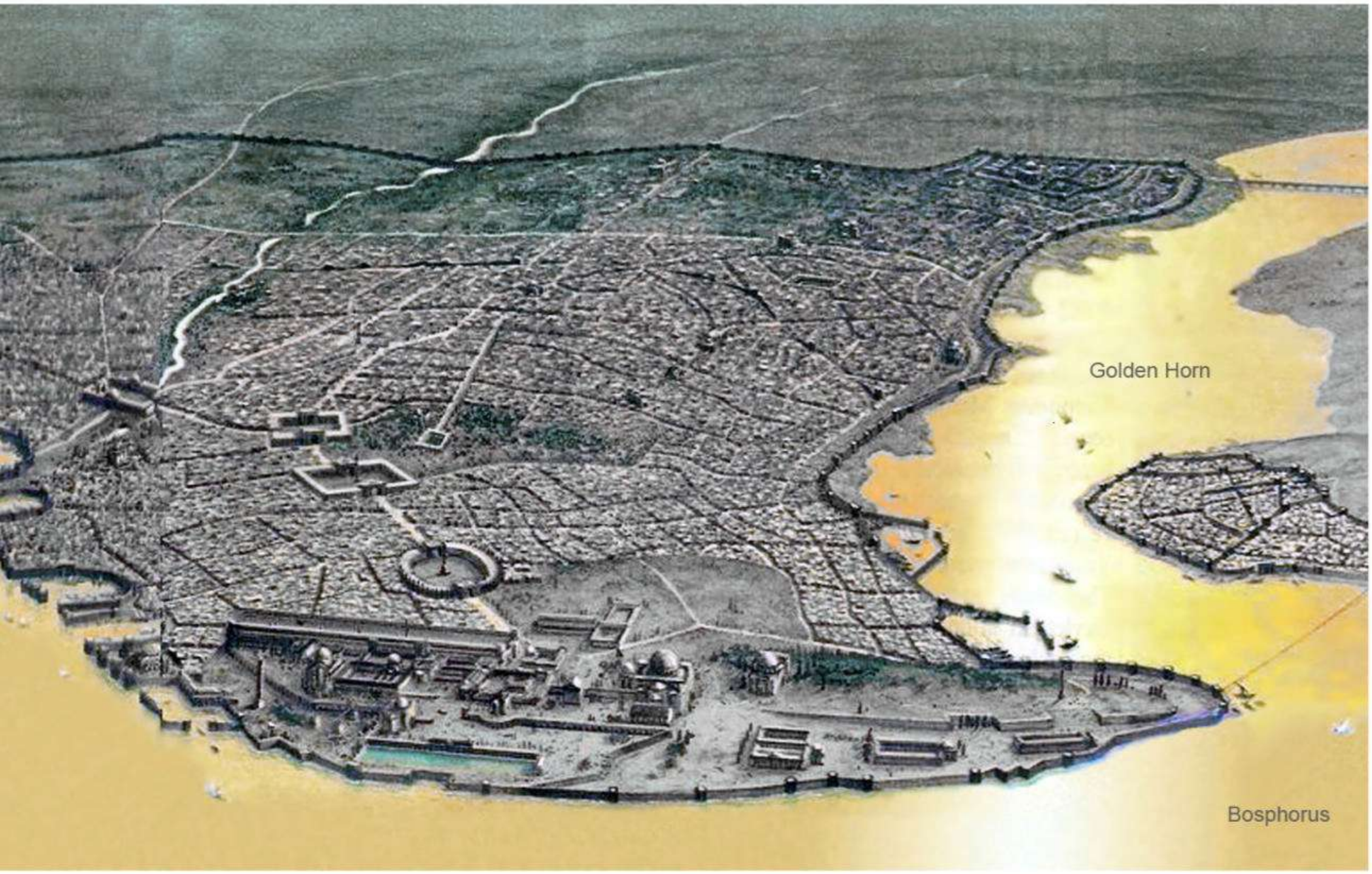


Image source: Wiki

Greek colonies spread across the territory, and with it Greco-Buddhism – a result of the interplay between Greek and Indian culture and trade routes after Alexander conquered the Northern region of India in 326 BCE. Artistic representations of Buddha began to change, being more anthropomorphic, instead of represented only by symbols. The influence of the Greek gods on Buddhist deities became widespread, for instance Heracles, the protector deity of Demetrius I of Bactria – a Greco-Bactrian king ruling from Central Asia to Northern India – influenced depictions of Vajrapani, a protector of the Buddha. During the 2nd century BCE, thirty thousand Buddhist monks travelled from the Greek city of Alexandria in the Caucasus, cited in modern day Afghanistan, all the way to Sri Lanka. Boundaries between regions and cultures began to blur in ways they never had before with the rise of Alexander's empire around the routes of the Silk Road.

By the time of Augustus Caesar in Rome, who reigned from 27 BCE until his death in 14 CE, Chinese silk had become incredibly popular throughout the Roman Empire. Silk was flowing freely from China all the way into the Greco-Roman world. Yet soon the Roman-Persian wars, and the rise of the Sassanid Empire, brought this flow to a halt, inflating prices, and making silk almost impossible to procure. While this made it even more desirable and prestigious, it also meant that the ever-avaricious Roman Empire soon began to covet the secret and lucrative means of silk production for themselves.

> "Boundaries between regions and cultures began to blur in ways they never had before with the rise of Alexander's empire around the Silk Road"

The Roman passion for silk from the 1st century BCE became so out of control that the Senate itself was forced to bring in laws to control it – for both moral and monetary reasons, all attested to by Strabo, Seneca the Younger, and Pliny the Elder. Many regulations, known as Sumptuariae Leges or sumptuary laws, were put in place during the reign of Tiberius, to restrict excessive expenditure on luxuries like banquets and dress, and the government took a role in managing personal expenditure. It was said that money was flowing too freely out of the Roman Empire, and straight to China, depleting the wealth contained within it, and so too impacting the power it wielded. Some went so far as to suggest this as a contributing factor in the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Indeed, when the Visigoths besieged Rome, they demanded a ransom of 4,000 silk tunics, along with a great weight of gold. Morality was also a consideration in the formulation of these laws. Seneca the Younger, in the 1st century CE, wrote that silks – so thin that they provided little coverage and decency to the women wearing them – were now 'called clothes', suggesting that 'her husband has no more acquaintance than any outsider or foreigner with his wife's body.' The wearing of silk by men had been forbidden, and Tyrian purple was restricted for use by the higher echelons of society and as diplomatic gifts, and for the Emperor alone by the 4th century BCE. In the Byzantine Empire, the colour was used to dye imperial silks alone.

In the 4th century CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine is credited with bringing a new dawn to the Roman Empire, by making Byzantium the new capital of the Roman Empire; it was renamed Constantinople after his death. The city was renowned as the most powerful in Europe from the mid-5th century, until its fall to the Ottomans, and this was no accident: silk brought wealth to those who controlled it, and here, the success of Byzantine Silk was no exception.

By the time Justinian came to power, Roman women had been wearing silk stola for centuries, while the men too wore silks imported from Han China across the land routes of the Silk Road, via the Parthian and Sassanid Empires. Silk, as a trading commodity, was shipped in all forms: from raw silk, to yarns, and fully fledged fabric. Each place an item passed through, each dye or decoration that was added to a garment also added value. Interestingly, religious proscriptions against silk existed. Both the Bible and Tannaim condemned the wearing of luxurious silk clothes, stating that each Jewish citizen should wear equal dress: Tyrian blue stripes on their cloaks, whether rich or poor, that indicated an equal status. Garments and fabric should be restricted to cheaply dyed wool or linen. This conflicted strongly with the Roman ideas that garments should reflect status, even in the fabric that they are made from, and the colours they are dyed. Clothing, in its colour and fabric, was a true symbol of both social class, as well as cultural identity throughout the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Yet, in the face of such different socio-religious mores, Justinian decreed that imperial factories could take control of silk production in 541 CE, restricting access to whom could buy it.

By the 6th century CE, the knowledge of how to produce silk finally reached the West. This continued until the fall of Constantinople in the 15th century. The Roman Empire's reliance on imported silk all changed when the Byzantine Empire began to manufacture its own silk, during the time of Emperor Julian of the Eastern Roman Empire, from 527 CE to 565 CE.

The historian Procopius, around this time, noted that Justinian allowed travelling Indian monks to come before him and speak. They declared that they had learned the techniques of silk making on their journey, and that the Emperor no longer needed to buy silk from the Persians. They claimed that silk was created by worms, and while the worms would never reach the Emperor alive, their eggs could be grown easily by covering them in dung and keeping them warm until they hatched. The monks returned to India, but the eggs were indeed soon brought to Byzantium, successfully hatched, and then fed on mulberry leaves. And this is how silk production is said to have reached the Roman Empire. Legend tells that Emperor Justinian sent the two monks to China to get silkworm cocoons, and they were smuggled back in bamboo canes – although it is believed the eggs actually came via the Sogdians, who requested an alliance against Sassanid Persia. By 5th to 6th century, silk was being produced within the Byzantine Empire across Constantinople, Beirut, Antioch, Tyre, and Thebes, and the Byzantine Empire began to control the silk trade across Europe, and watched on as both the Persian and Chinese domination diminished. However, Chinese silks were still considered to be of the finest quality, and evidence of continued trade exists, with gifts of Roman glass still appearing in China until much later.

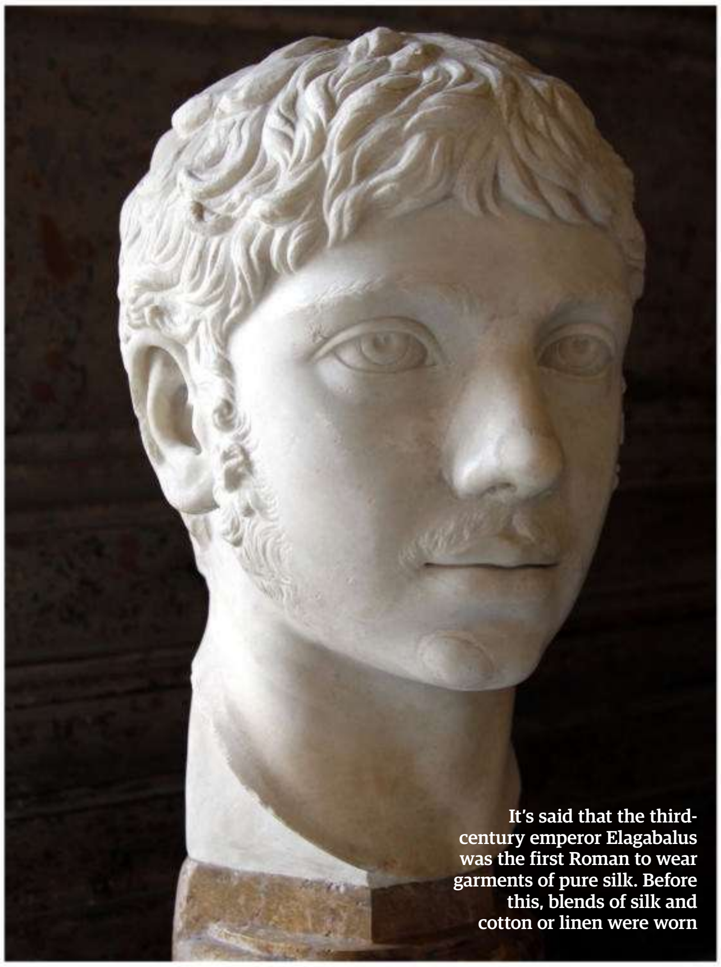
The Silk Road is not a road, it's a concept: the concept of connecting East to West

Image source: Pixabay

Silk was one of the most vital products of Byzantium. Made in a myriad of colours, it incorporated golden threads and complex designs. There were five different types of weave used for fabric production in the Byzantine and Islamic industries, yet the most luxurious of these as samite, which many consider the most important type in Byzantium. It is associated with the Sassanid culture, reaching Europe via Italy after the 9th century. The importance of silk led to the industry becoming highly regulated, since it was a fabric that spoke of royalty – and this was indeed so, as it was an important source of income for the crown, and used as both payment and in matters of diplomacy, used to bolster Italian alliances particularly from the 4th to 12th centuries. Churches, too, had a demand for silk to produce both clothing and wall decorations. It was a thing of wealth, underpinning status and power.

> "The Silk Road network led to a boom in inter-cultural dialogue and experience… in order to trade in the different regions that the route crossed"

While the trade routes were named after the much-coveted and legendary silk and its processes, this was by no means the only commodity that moved along it. Many other items and materials from all of the regions traversed by the trade routes moved throughout the network: from different types of cloth and animal skins, to spices and foods, to metal work and tools, to more ornate and decorative objects: art, gemstones and even relics and religious items. Rare spices in particular were highly in demand and fetched huge prices.



It's said that the third-century emperor Elagabalus was the first Roman to wear garments of pure silk. Before this, blends of silk and cotton or linen were worn

Image source: Wiki

The Silk Road facilitated the trade of coveted items, but it also held much greater significance: its existence allowed the spread of ideas and innovation. These were routes crossing both physical and cultural boundaries, transcending mountains, rivers, and cultural differences alike. Weaving through the physical landscape, they also flowed through different societies, exposing local cultures to the wider cultural landscape, and bringing new influences – and conflicts – into places that they had never reached before.

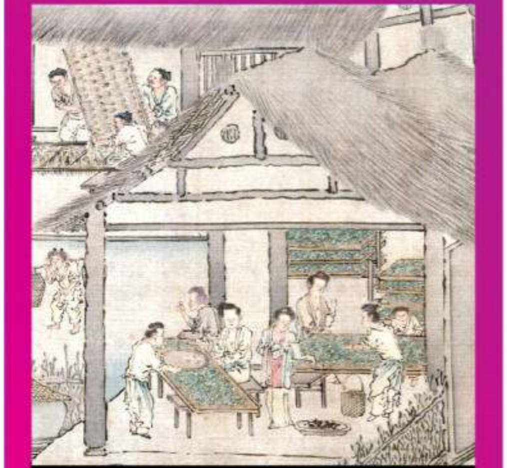
The Silk Road network led to a boom in inter-cultural dialogue and experience. In order to trade in the different regions that the route crossed, merchants would need to learn both the language and social mores of the people living in the region: their expectations, their taboos, and the etiquette needed to do business. With this came the exchange of knowledge: astronomy, science, mathematics, literature, poetry, and art. Knowledge of how to create irrigation systems flowed into the different regions. While we often think immediately of traders using the routes, many other types of people also used them to gather their own treasures, and there are accounts of pilgrims and religious groups using the roads. Some used these to travel to sacred destinations, for instance Buddhist monks from China travelling to India to collect sacred texts, yet others used the roads to convert people to their own religions. While the dance between Christianity and Islam along its route is famous – with the rise and fall of Byzantium, then the city becoming Constantinople, and later Istanbul – many other religions spread along the Silk Road thoroughfares, from Hinduism and Buddhism to Zoroastrianism. Conversely to those who were purposefully taking their own cultural ideas to new places as missionaries and pilgrims, it was easy for any traveller exposed to new cultural and religious ideas to take these on, carrying them back to their own regions in turn. The Silk Roads were a major hub of cultural, religious and social dissemination.

Yet the high times were not to last, and the Silk Road proved that it was a phenomena that could both give and take away. As crowds surged along the Silk Road, they carried bubonic plague within their midst. In 542 CE the plague decimated Constantinople, and things would never be the same again. The Silk Road was a melting pot of trade, knowledge, belief and culture, ribboning through the landscape, a catalyst for change, leaving new cultures and knowledge in its wake. It was a thing of control, of power, and of opportunity, and the power of the Silk Road to change the face of the West – and the world – forever is undisputed to this day.

## *Materiality and conceptual value*

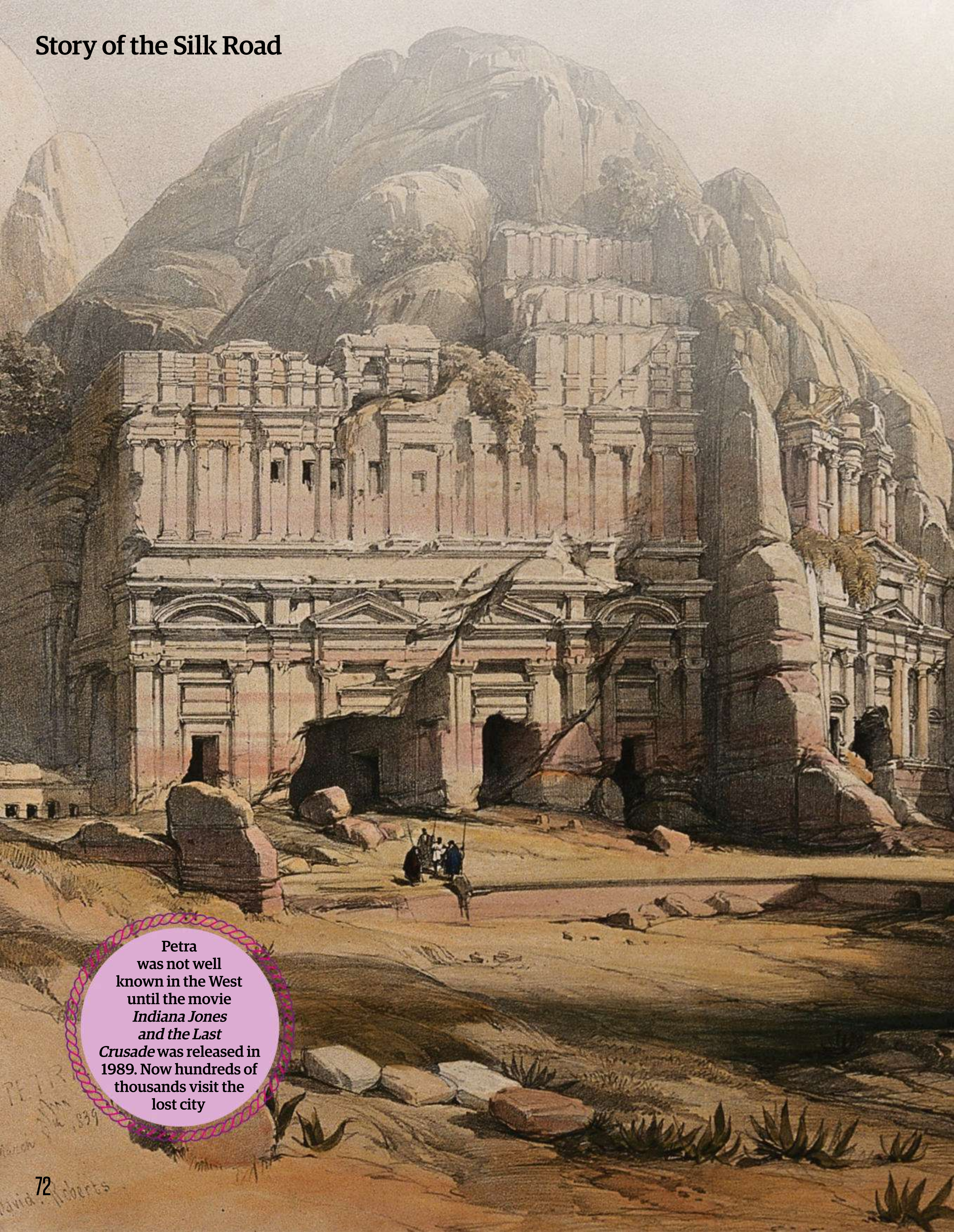
### The rarity of the goods that travelled along the Silk Road contributed to their perceived value in different territories

Silk was a highly desired fabric, and was one of the leading reasons for the development of trade routes from Europe. And while trade in silks began early on, the knowledge of its production remained elusive for many centuries more. Items from far afield contain different types of value. In their materiality, they hold within them the cost of the raw materials; the costs of extraction and production; the cost of labour – both in man hours, and in the cost of controlling people, technologies and materials. Yet they hold a much more hidden power under the surface: that of conceptual value. From irreplaceable heirlooms to holy relics, items can hold values much greater than their parts; this is imbued by the symbolism an item is given by the people who use it. A modern example would be designer labels – they are worth much more than they cost to make in practical terms because of the prestige names they bear. The same was true in the ancient world, and the items that travelled along the Silk Road were imbued with just such symbolism, a symbolic value that increased their value exponentially.

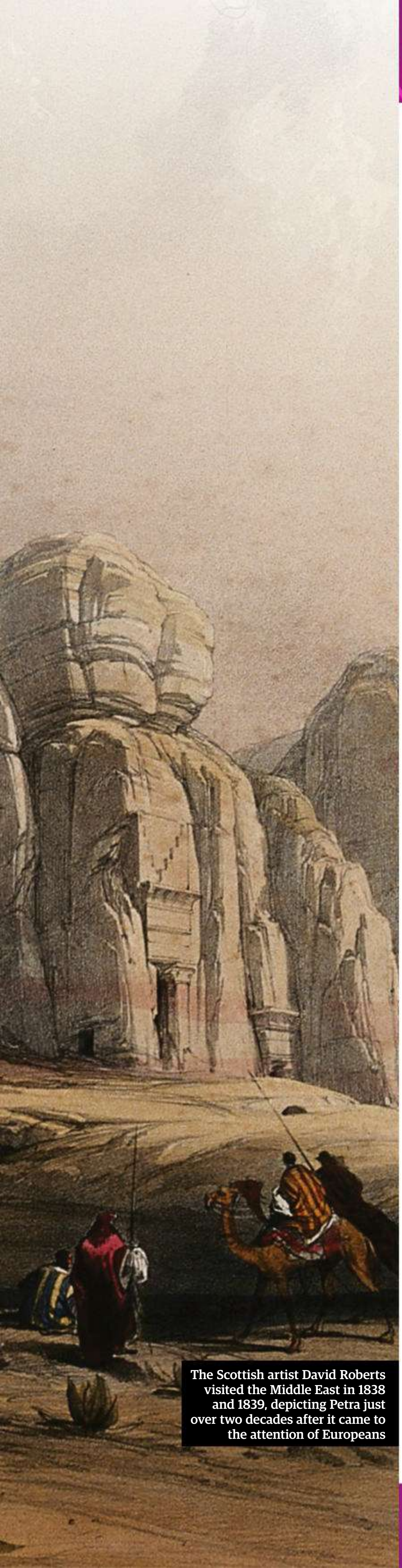


Even when silk was produced in the West, Chinese silk maintained its prestige status, due to the distance travelled and the symbolism it held

Image source: Wiki



Petra was not well known in the West until the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was released in 1989. Now hundreds of thousands visit the lost city



The Scottish artist David Roberts visited the Middle East in 1838 and 1839, depicting Petra just over two decades after it came to the attention of Europeans

Image source: Welcome Collection

# Frankincense and myrrh

*Petra: The beating heart of the Nabataean Kingdom, the wealthy trade hub on the Silk Road, the once vibrant city, lost and forgotten for centuries. What is the story of this fabulous place and why was it lost to obscurity for so long?*

Written by Jem Duducu

**Located in what is now Jordan's Arabah Valley, a few hours' drive from Amman, the story of Petra starts with two key factors. The first is found in the world of luxury and fashion. Egypt was rich and powerful. This was due not to mineral wealth, but to a well-organised society and the fact that the annual flooding of the Nile made the land on its banks the breadbasket of the Mediterranean. As in any complex society, there was a small number of very rich people, but there was also a middle-class of merchants and artisans who had disposable incomes.**

So, how did they spend their money?

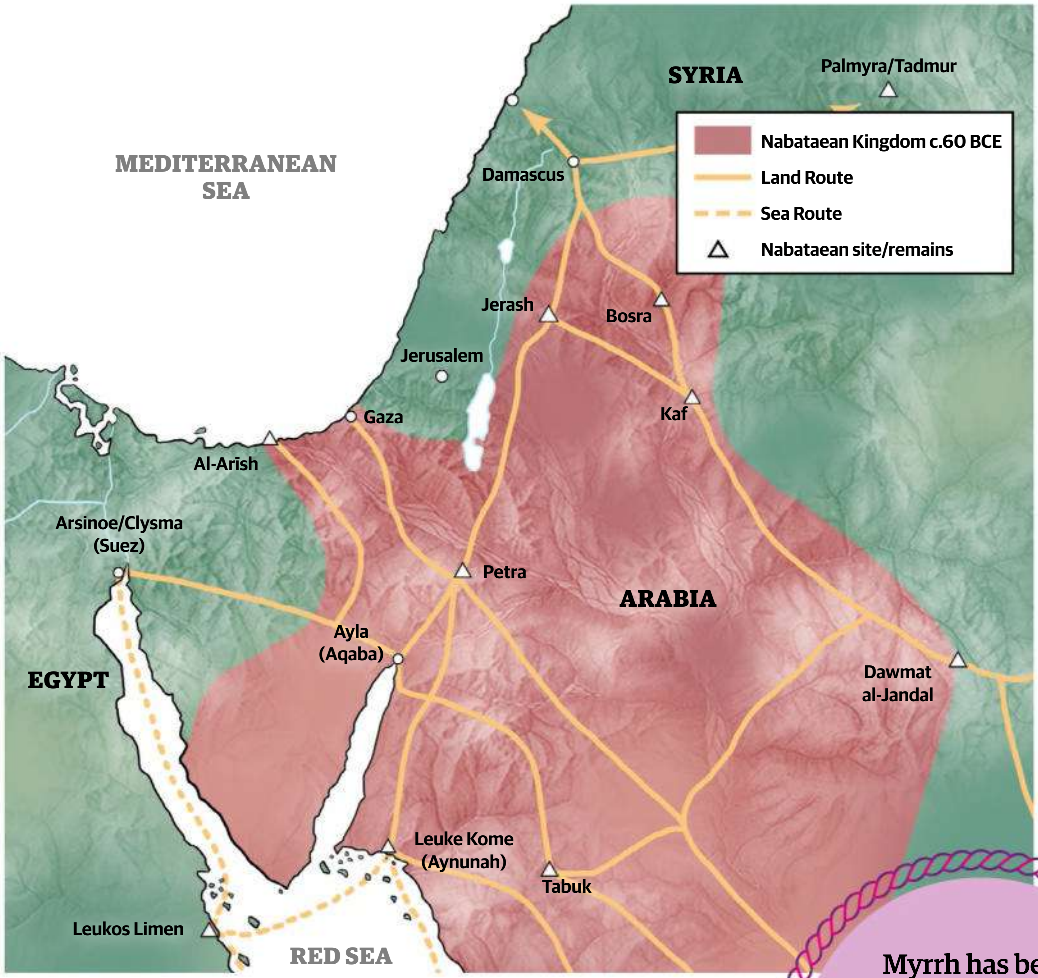
Aristocratic Mesopotamian women were possibly the first to invent and wear lipstick, about 5,000 years ago. They also crushed gemstones and used them to decorate their faces, mainly on the lips and around the eyes. Of course, the images from ancient Egypt reveal that both men and women used black eye makeup, something that might seem unusual today, but was standard fare then.

Perfume also plays a role in the history of luxury and fashion at this time and is as ancient as makeup. The first reference to perfume also comes from ancient Mesopotamia, around 1200 BCE, when a woman called Tapputi is said to have created a scent from a mixture of balsam and myrrh. Her creations were used as perfume by aristocrats and as incense in religious ceremonies, uses that spilled over into the wider world.

This leads us to the Silk Road, a term created by a German explorer in the 19th century. The name suggests this was a specifically designated road, running from east to west (and vice versa). In fact, it was a catch-all term for the multiple routes used by the thousands of traders who bought, sold and distributed their wares from distant China, across the gigantic Central Asian steppe, into the Middle East and, eventually, to Europe.

Everywhere, throughout the regions, there is evidence of this trade. The bright blue stones in Tutankhamen's mask (14th century BCE) are lapis lazuli, which came from Afghanistan; and the oldest silk found in Egypt (which had to have come from China) was discovered on a mummy in the Valley of the Kings, dating from 1070 BCE. Silk scarves dyed in India became the headscarves of tribal women who lived along the Black Sea in Asia Minor. Silk Road trade changed and enhanced the lives of everyone in the regions around it.

Silk Road trade was further enhanced by the Persian Empire which created the Royal Road (5th century BCE) that ran for nearly 1,800 miles across Asia. The links between east and west were further strengthened during Alexander the Great's campaign in the 4th century BCE, and it was at this time that Petra became the capital city of the Nabataean Kingdom.


SYRIA
Palmyra/Tadmur
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Damascus
Nabataean Kingdom c.60 BCE
Land Route
Sea Route
Nabataean site/remains
Jerash
Bosra
Jerusalem
Gaza
Kaf
Al-Arish
Arsinoe/Clysma (Suez)
Petra
ARABIA
Ayla (Aqaba)
EGYPT
Dawmat al-Jandal
Leuke Kome (Aynunah)
Tabuk
Leukos Limen
RED SEA

It is Petra's location that made it so strategically significant. It explains why the city became a central trading hub in the past and why it still exists as an important archaeological site to this day. Putting it simply, it's hard to manage a city in the desert. But if that city has a source of water and if it is profiting from trade because of its location as a place where caravans from many routes converge, then its success is all but guaranteed. Putting it even more simply, the effort is worth the reward.

The people of Petra were smart enough to realise that they were perfectly placed to trade in the spices, precious metals, silk, ivory and other goods from China, India and the Persian Gulf on their way to the ports of the Mediterranean. We shall also see that they cornered the market in two of the major luxury items of the time. Consumer demand from kingdoms to the west meant regular revenues poured into Petra's coffers.

The second major factor in the story of Petra is the birth and evolution of the Nabataean Kingdom, a broader factor but not unrelated to the first. Frustratingly, Petra is covered in written inscriptions, but their context is limited. The civilisation was literate, but while we have many fragments of information from coins, inscriptions and other archaeological finds, there are no great historical records or fragments of literature from the kingdom itself. Indeed, most of what we know was written by outsiders trying to explain the Nabataean culture. This ultimately leads to huge amounts of conjecture and not a lot of consensus.

The landscape around Petra is harsh and unforgiving. Everything is composed of the soft red sandstone that forms the surrounding hills and the valley in which the city was constructed. Looking around today it seems impossible that anything like a civilised trading society could survive here let alone flourish to become rich and cosmopolitan. But hidden in the valley's centre, amongst the ruins of this once prosperous city, are the remains of the aqueducts that ran for miles from an underground

Myrrh has been traded for millennia. While it is sometimes sold in a hard resin form, myrrh oil, sometimes called tincture of myrrh, is more common

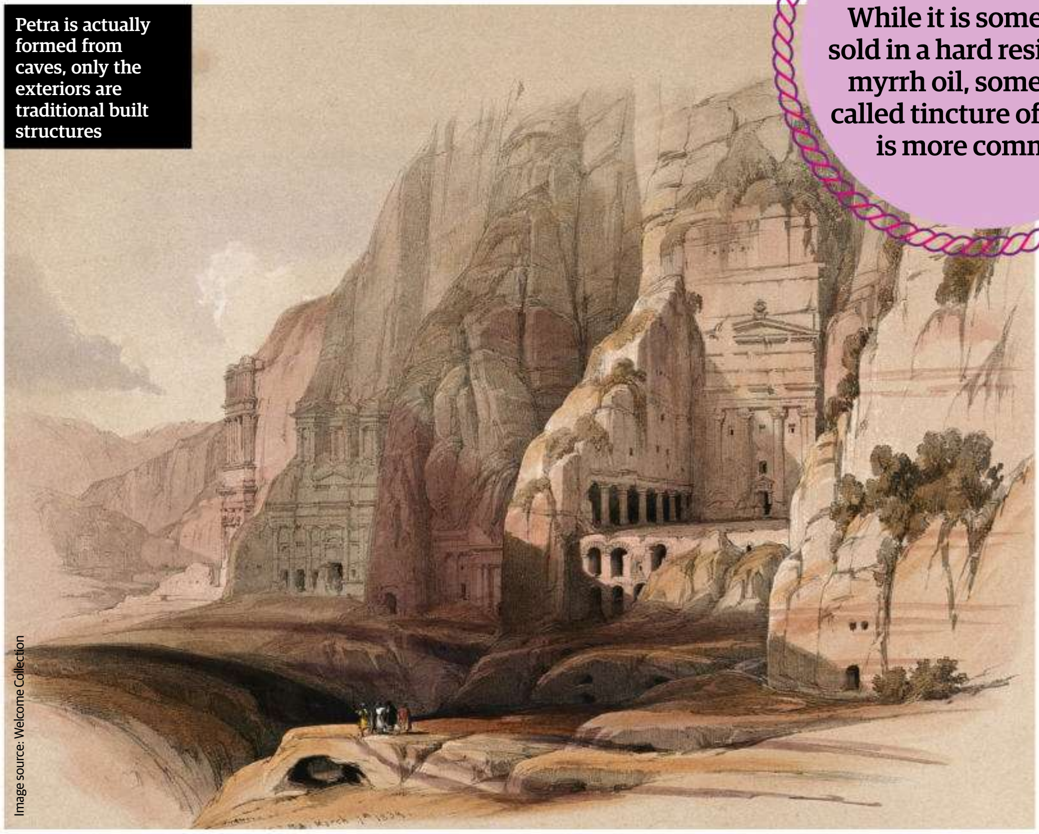
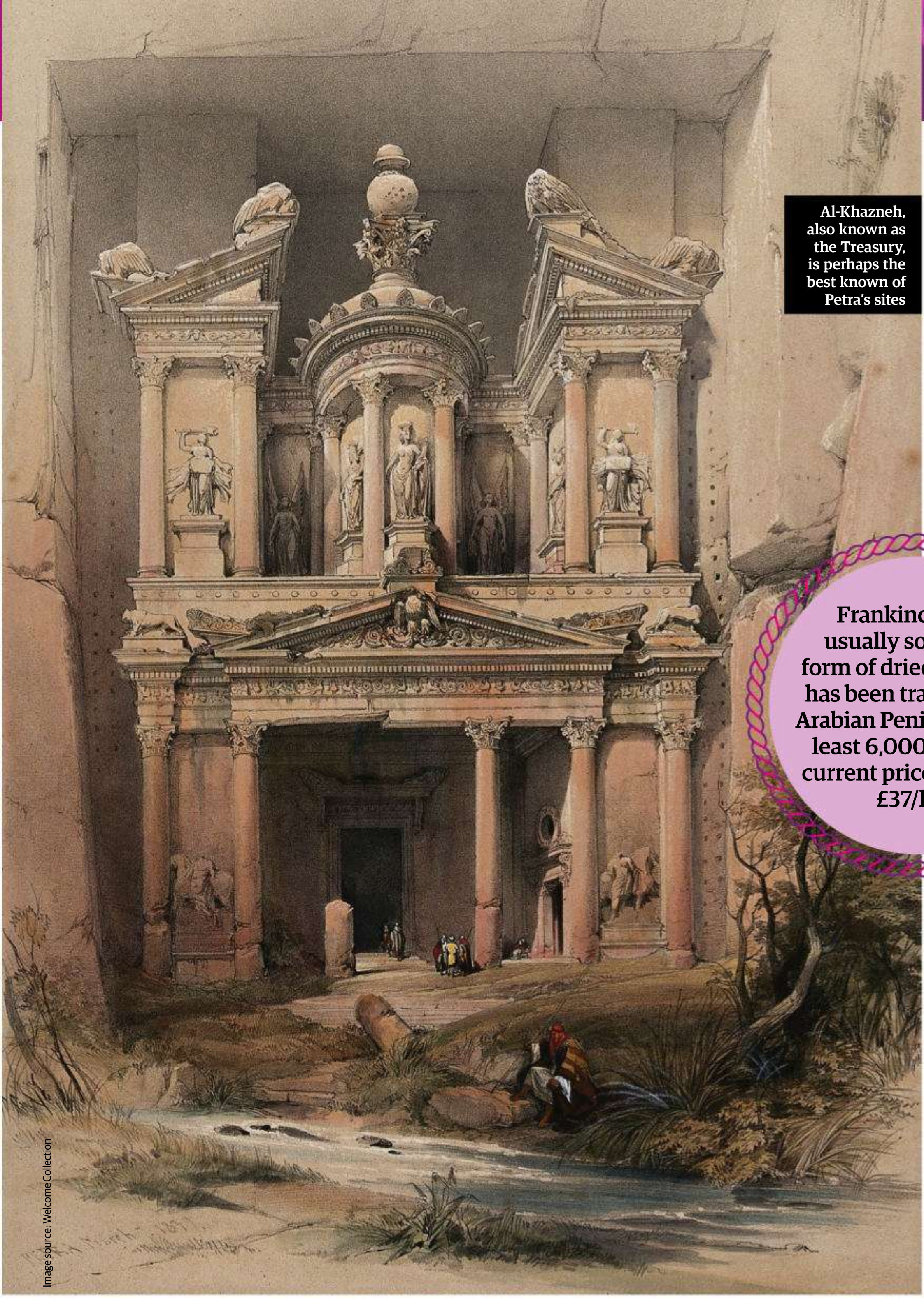

Petra is actually formed from caves, only the exteriors are traditional built structures

Image source: Welcome Collection

Image source: Getty Images



Al-Khazneh, also known as the Treasury, is perhaps the best known of Petra's sites

Image source: Welcome Collection

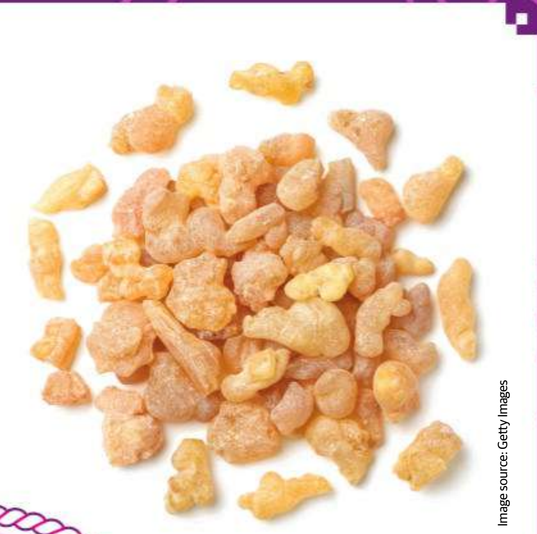


Image source: Getty Images

spring. The buildings are not structures, but caves which penetrate the rock cliffs to produce a site filled with palaces and temples, theatres and tombs, villas, baths, fountains and gardens. Petra was an ancient crossroads between east and west, a city alive with camel caravans and a busy marketplace, home to some 30,000 people at its peak 2,000 years ago.

The Nabataean Kingdom covered a patchwork of modern countries, including the Sinai Desert of Egypt, Palestine and Southern Israel, most of Jordan and a small part of northern Saudi Arabia. The kingdom was formed by an alliance of Bedouin tribes, nomads who depended on their herds of camels and horses for survival as they crisscrossed the region in search of grasslands.

The history of the Bedouin is an oral tradition and the name itself is an anglicised version of an Arabic word, which simply means 'desert dwellers' – it was a completely appropriate name.

*"Today it seems impossible that anything like a civilised trading society could survive here let alone flourish to become rich and cosmopolitan"*

**Frankincense is usually sold in the form of dried resin and has been traded in the Arabian Peninsula for at least 6,000 years. Its current price is around £37/kilo**

The nomadic tribes supplemented their meagre living by raiding outposts on the edges of the desolate regions of desert. Sometimes they would be paid to protect caravans, at other times they would attack them, but as the traffic in the region increased the Bedouin prospered and at some point came together to form the permanent settlement that became the foundation of the Nabataean Kingdom.

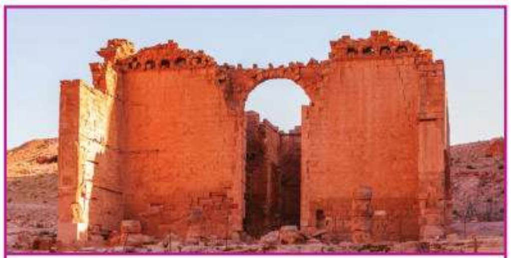
The people of Petra didn't speak Arabic (or even an early version of it) but an early Semitic language that seemed to share a lot in common with Akkadian, the language of Mesopotamia and the Neo-Assyrian languages to the north. Whatever the limitations of language, the language of trade overcame all obstacles and honed the talents of people who were gifted in business. The growth of the young Nabataean Kingdom coincided with a huge change in the geopolitics of the region when a military campaign, largely between Egypt to the south and the Persian Empire to the north, led to a change in the spheres of influence and allowed Petra to gain an advantage. The result of these advantages was that the Nabataeans gained the monopoly on that super-luxurious item of the ancient world: frankincense.

Frankincense is, in essence, plant sap. It comes from a hardy bush that grows in hot and arid environments. Indeed, the plant is unusual in its ability to grow in such a harsh environment; it's even been known to grow out of solid rock. This kind of landscape pretty much summarises the Arabian Peninsula as well as the Horn of Africa, and as Petra was the major trading centre in the region, it became the natural outlet for this resin.

The earliest images of frankincense appear on a temple in Egypt built by Hatshepsut, who died in the 15th century BCE. This confirms and underlines its importance as well as its antiquity.

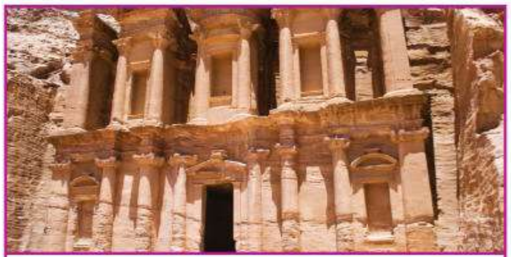
Images source: Getty, Alamy

Image source: Shutterstock



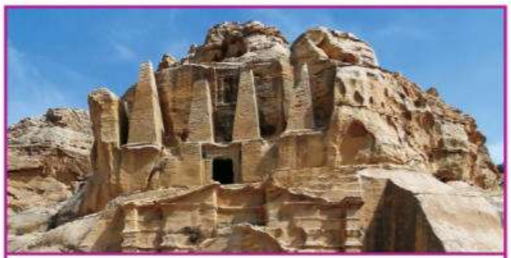
### 1 Qasr al-Bint

The 'Palace of the Pharaoh's Daughter' is thought to have served as the city's main temple. Worship of Nabataean deities Dushara and al-Uzza is thought to have been centred here.



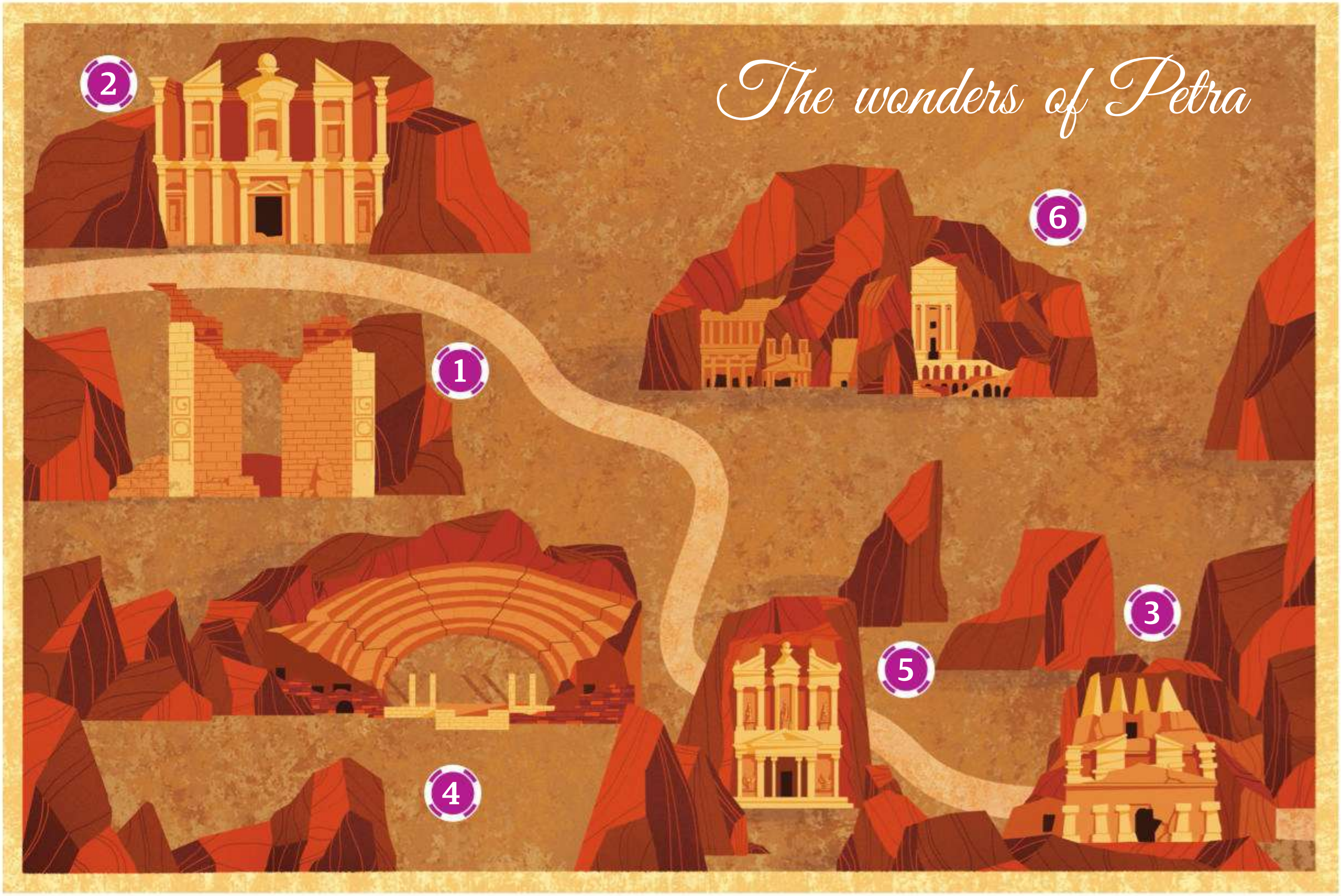
### 2 Ad-Deir

Petra's largest monument, the 'Monastery' sits on a high plateau of Jebel ad-Deir. It's thought to have served as a temple-cenotaph commemorating King Obodas I.



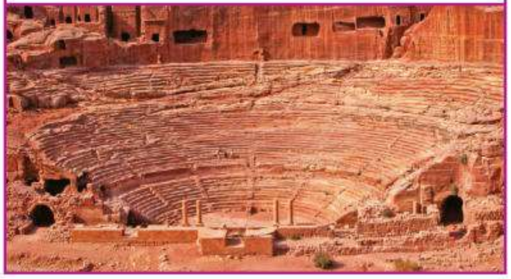
### 3 Obelisk tomb

Named for the four obelisks that dominate its façade, the Obelisk tomb sits above the façade of the Bab el Siq Triclinium (a banqueting hall), which is believed to have been carved later.



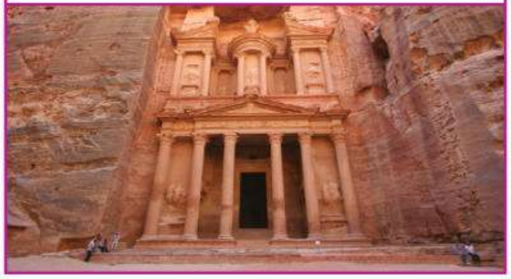
### 4 The theatre

The theatre exactly follows Roman design rules but with the Nabataean architectural twist of the entire structure being hollowed out from a sheer rock face.



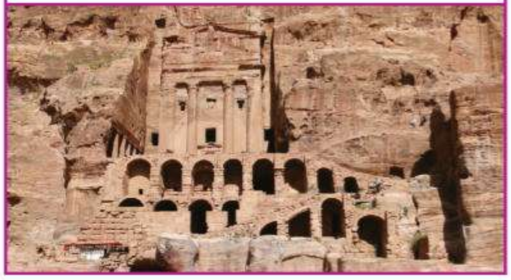
### 5 Al-Khazneh

Archaeologists theorise that this was the mortuary temple of either King Aretas III or Aretas IV, built as a place to worship the sovereign as well as being his burial place.



### 6 Urn tomb

The multi-level Urn Tomb is the first of five façades (known together as the Royal Tombs) that loom over Petra's colonnaded street from a ledge cut into Jebel al-Khubta.



The frankincense, in this case, had come from the land of Punt, which, while its exact location is still contested, seems to have been in the general area of the Horn of Africa.

The reason for its importance is the aromatic qualities of its granules, used, as mentioned earlier, by the rich as perfume and by the religious as devotional incense. Its rarity made it a very expensive commodity, and the monopoly helped make Petra even wealthier.

Then there was myrrh. While Petra did not have a monopoly on this, it was one of the epicentres of myrrh trade, and once again, we are in the realm of perfumes and incense. Myrrh has been valued for thousands of years for these qualities, but unlike frankincense, it is a natural antiseptic. It is derived from a very thorny tree called Commiphora, whose natural habitat is, once again, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. It is interesting to note that this may be an example of a product that went the other way on the Silk Road as it has been a part of Chinese medicine for at least a millennia.

*"The earliest images of frankincense appear on a temple in Egypt built by Hatshepsut"*

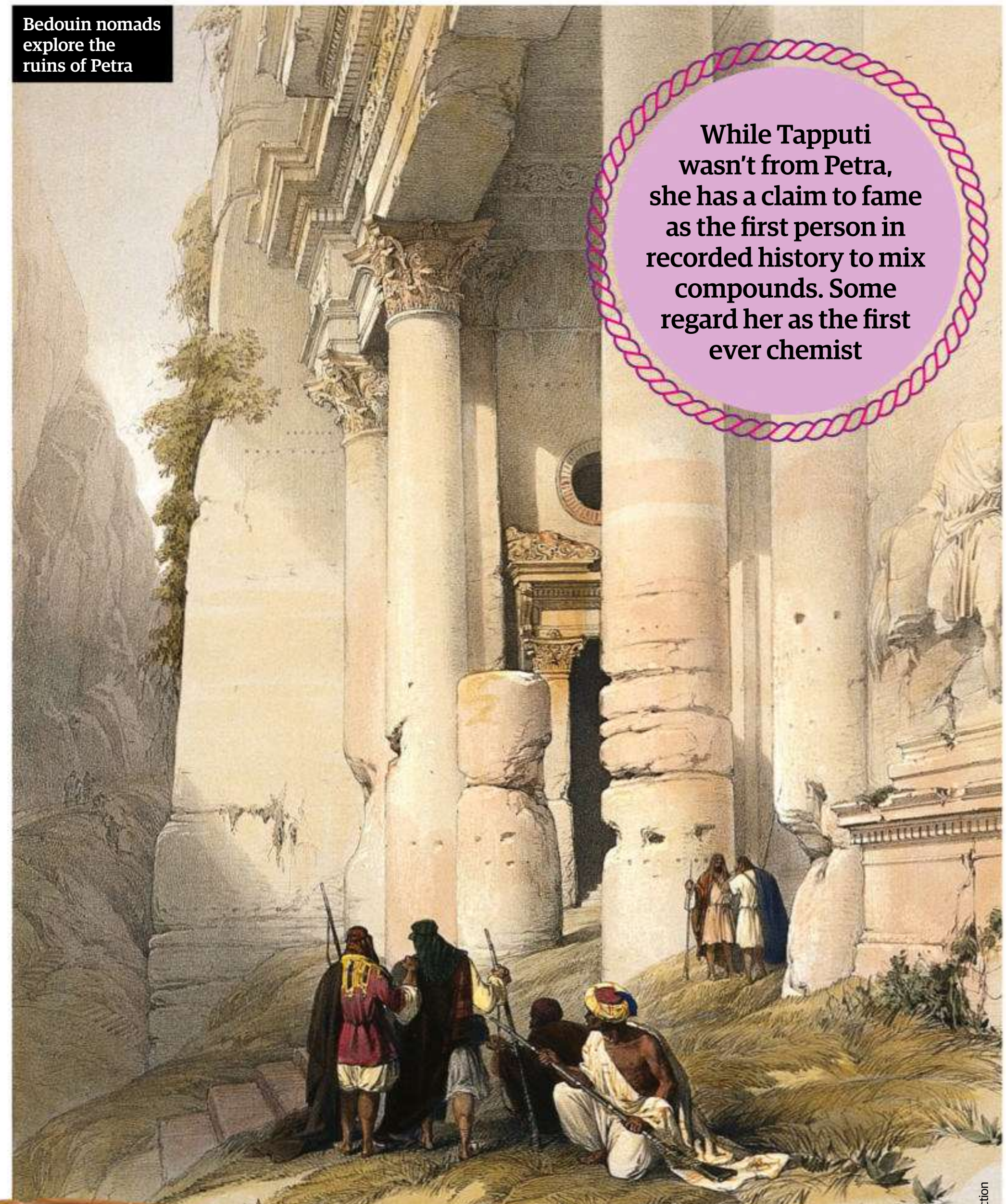
By now, you might well have made a connection between the kingdom's two major exports and the Bible. However, before we get to the most famous example of their importance, it's worth pointing out that myrrh is mentioned a number of times in the Bible. It is almost uniquely associated with religious ritual, but on one occasion, it warns of its intoxicating qualities.

Touching briefly on the Nativity, there is, of course, the story of the three wise men bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. The point of the gifts is that they were all fabulously expensive and, quite literally, gifts fit for a king.

To anyone around at the time, these gifts would have validated Jesus' position as a King of Kings. The two gifts of frankincense and myrrh were very much associated with areas outside of the Roman Empire and to the east of it. They point to a number of anti-Roman sentiments in the New Testament, right up to Jesus' title of King of Kings, which was actually the Persian emperor's title of Shahenshah. In other words, with the Roman persecution of the Christians and Jews at the time of the writing of the New Testament, there seems to have been a desire to look to other cultures to validate Jesus' role on Earth.

There is, however, another connection between the Nabataean Kingdom (and specifically Petra) and the Bible. King Aretas IV was king from roughly 9 BCE to 40 CE, in other words, he was a contemporary of Jesus. Aretas married his daughter to Herod Antipas, the King Herod of New Testament fame. Herod would eventually divorce her and marry his brother's wife, a union which caused a scandal. John the Baptist was outspoken in his condemnation of this immoral marriage, and it was this opposition that led to Herod's decision to have him beheaded. So, once again, we see the Nabataean Kingdom playing a role in other, better-known regimes.

But it is Aretas who leads us straight back to Petra, where the people demonstrated a flair for the theatrical with the city's main entrance via a natural ravine that splits the towering rocks for almost a mile. Once through it, the visitor is

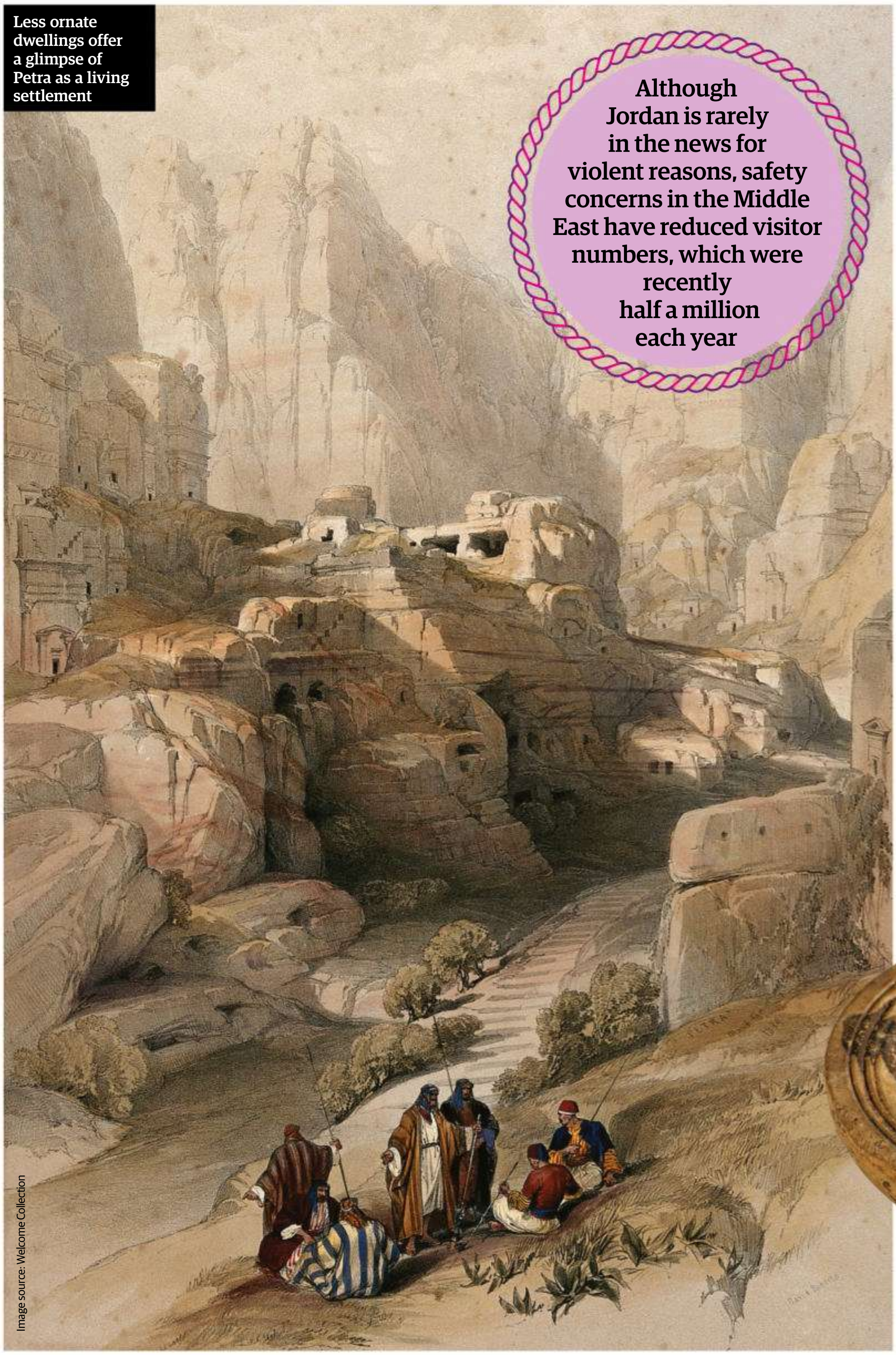

Temple called El Khasne Petra

Bedouin nomads explore the ruins of Petra

Image source: Welcome Collection

While Tapputi wasn't from Petra, she has a claim to fame as the first person in recorded history to mix compounds. Some regard her as the first ever chemist

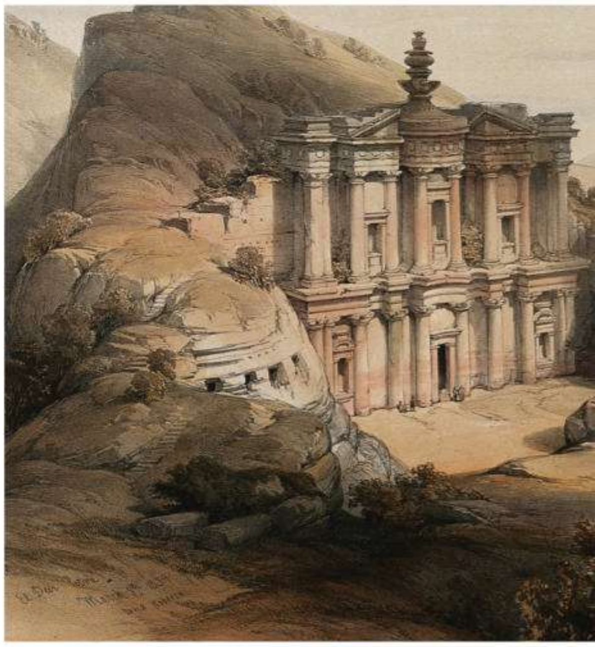
A ceramic bowl believed to have been produced by the Nabataean Kingdom, it clearly shows Greek influence



Less ornate dwellings offer a glimpse of Petra as a living settlement

Although Jordan is rarely in the news for violent reasons, safety concerns in the Middle East have reduced visitor numbers, which were recently half a million each year

Image source: Welcome Collection



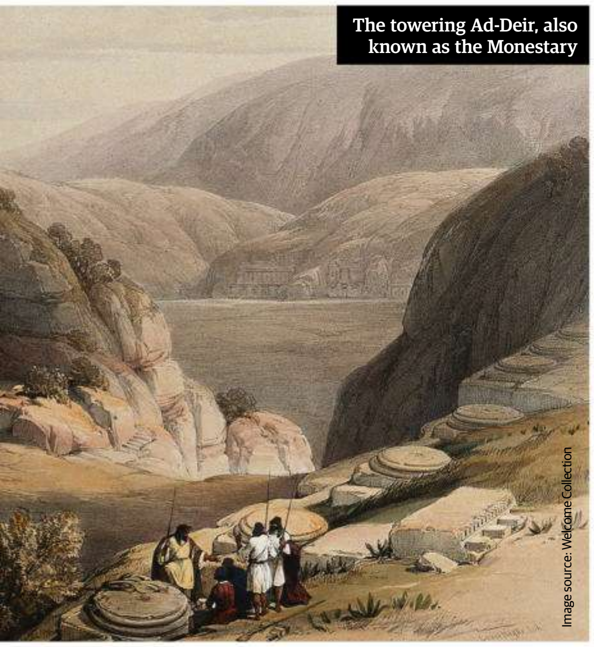
> *"The statues at the front of this magnificent edifice clearly relate to the pagan gods of both Rome and Greece"*

A Roman oil lamp dating from the 1st century CE, it may have been produced in Petra

confronted with the most famous site in Petra, Al Khazneh, or the Treasury.

It is said that the name comes from the riches stored in the great urn at the top of the circular building at the facade's centre. In reality, the structure is thought to be the mausoleum of Aretas IV. The statues at the front of this magnificent edifice clearly relate to the pagan gods of both Rome and Greece, and show that Greco-Roman polytheism was alive and well even outside of the Roman Empire. It is also a reminder that not only did the Nabataean Kingdom have the ability to spread soft power through many regions and empires by means of trade, but in turn, those trade routes brought back other cultures and concepts, including theology.

Although protected from sight by the natural ravine, Petra was poorly defended and very rich. It was, therefore, an obvious target for attack, and yet, it was surprisingly hard to conquer. The kingdom was notorious for its dry and desolate location, so sending a large army to conquer what was, in essence, a desert would almost invariably lead to that invading force having to retreat due to lack of water. The standard tactic of these desert-dwelling Bedouin forces of the Nabataean Kingdom was to harry invading armies and then melt away to allow the heat and lack of water to do their work for them, while their own forces replenished their water supplies at hidden



The towering Ad-Deir, also known as the Monestary

Image source: Wellcome Collection

watering holes. It was a simple but effective strategy. Diodorus, the Greek writer of the 1st century BCE, wrote: “Neither the Assyrians of old, nor the king of the Medes and Persians, nor yet those of the Macedonians have been able to enslave them, and […] They never brought their attempts to successful conclusion.” Adding that the Nabataeans were “exceptionally fond of freedom”.

It should be noted that the Nabataean Kingdom fought against a number of foes and expanded under a number of their kings. That’s not to say they won every battle, but they were certainly a force to be reckoned with, despite the fact that they were on the edges of two large empires. The Nabataeans feuded with the Persians on a number of occasions, but it was the ever-growing Roman Empire that was to be their undoing. Although there are no historical accounts or oral traditions of any great clashes by the armies of the Nabataeans in the region, we do know that by 107 CE, there were Roman military outposts in the kingdom, after which it became known as Arabia Petraea. It was about this time, in 106 CE, that the last King of the Nabataeans died. Rabbel II seems to have had an heir but he never took the throne. It could well have been that the lack of an obvious/strong successor, linked to a kingdom increasingly dependent on the much richer Roman Empire, led to a peaceful or administrative takeover, rather than one prosecuted by military force.

> **In 2007 there was a global poll to find the ‘new’ Seven Wonders of the World, and Petra was chosen by popular vote. Ironically it could have qualified for the original list**

While it wasn’t quite the most easterly territory of the Roman Empire, Arabia Petraea was absolutely a frontier land. A change in leadership and the integration of these lands into Roman territories ultimately led to Petra’s demise. Trade routes changed and, over time, the city became a backwater as the population dwindled. A devastating earthquake in 363 CE dealt a final blow when it destroyed the water management system, making the city untenable as a settlement.

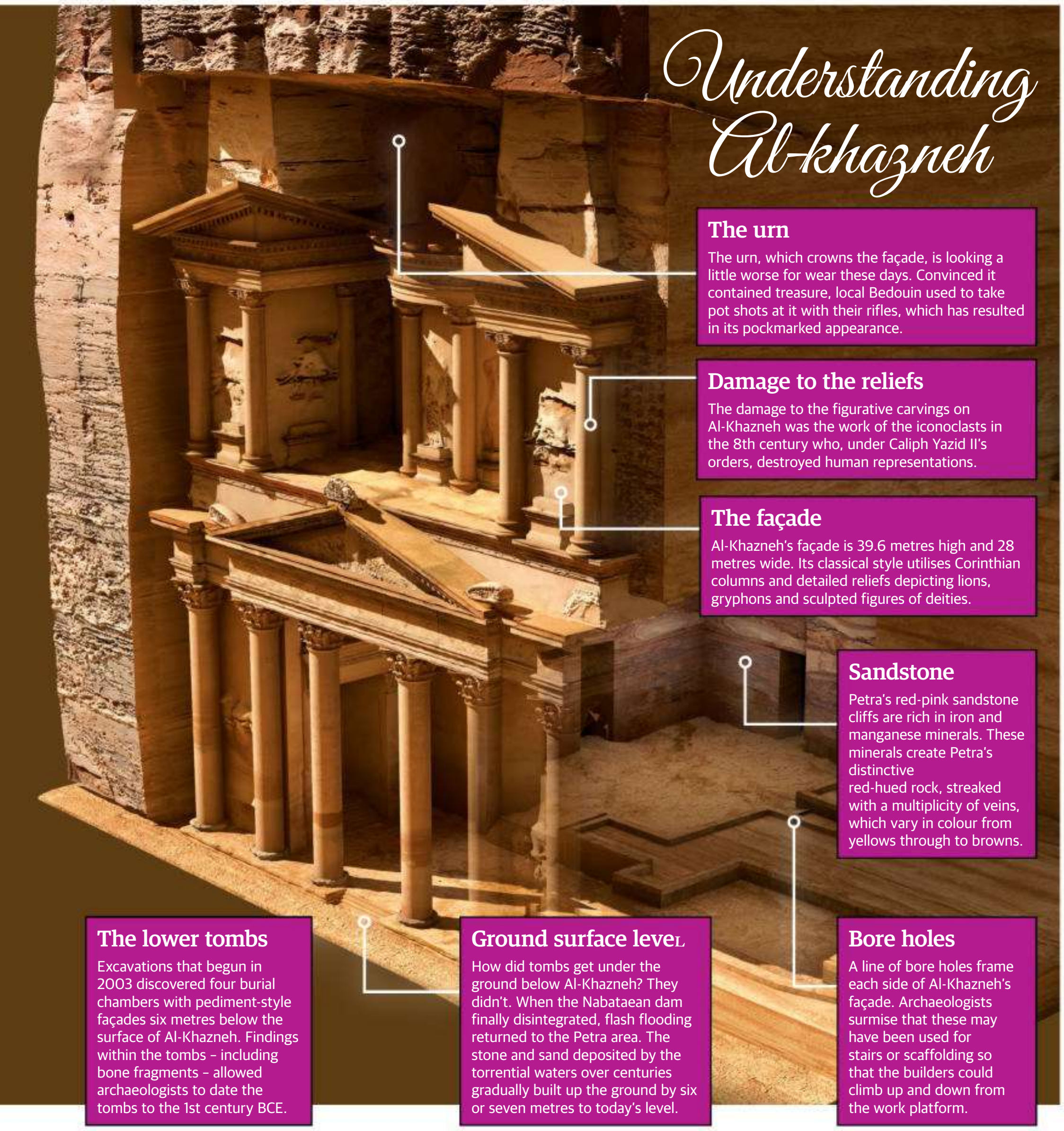
Arabia Petraea would remain part of the Eastern Roman Empire, now called the Byzantine Empire, into the 7th century. It would remain connected to this civilisation for centuries after Rome itself had fallen to the barbarians. However, in the 630s, it would become the first eastern province to fall to a new civilisation, the Islamic Caliphate. From that point on, Petra would be part of Muslim lands, a concept that would have been completely alien to the original inhabitants.

Petra did not fall to the sword, nor was it burnt to the ground by a barbarian horde. Petra was abandoned and because it was hidden away it was all but forgotten for nearly 2,000 years. For centuries, its only visitors were bandits who took advantage of its shelter and isolation, and some Bedouin families who lived on the site.

Then in 1812, a Swiss adventurer by the name of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, intrigued by tales of a lost city in the desert, posed as an Arab sheikh and persuaded a local guide to show him the ruins of what turned out to be Petra. In the 1980s, the few families still living there were relocated (not always willingly) when the site received UNESCO World Heritage status.

In the greater scheme of things, Petra was not a huge city, nor was it renowned at the time for its grandeur. In comparison to another ancient city such as Ephesus, the site pales in both its size and the quality of its statues and edifices. However, Petra’s incredibly well preserved and wonderfully ornate facades, carved into the living rock, are what make it unique. Its location made it what it was and preserved it for future generations.

## Understanding Al-khazneh



**The urn**

The urn, which crowns the façade, is looking a little worse for wear these days. Convinced it contained treasure, local Bedouin used to take pot shots at it with their rifles, which has resulted in its pockmarked appearance.

**Damage to the reliefs**

The damage to the figurative carvings on Al-Khazneh was the work of the iconoclasts in the 8th century who, under Caliph Yazid II’s orders, destroyed human representations.

**The façade**

Al-Khazneh’s façade is 39.6 metres high and 28 metres wide. Its classical style utilises Corinthian columns and detailed reliefs depicting lions, gryphons and sculpted figures of deities.

**Sandstone**

Petra’s red-pink sandstone cliffs are rich in iron and manganese minerals. These minerals create Petra’s distinctive red-hued rock, streaked with a multiplicity of veins, which vary in colour from yellows through to browns.

**The lower tombs**

Excavations that begun in 2003 discovered four burial chambers with pediment-style façades six metres below the surface of Al-Khazneh. Findings within the tombs – including bone fragments – allowed archaeologists to date the tombs to the 1st century BCE.

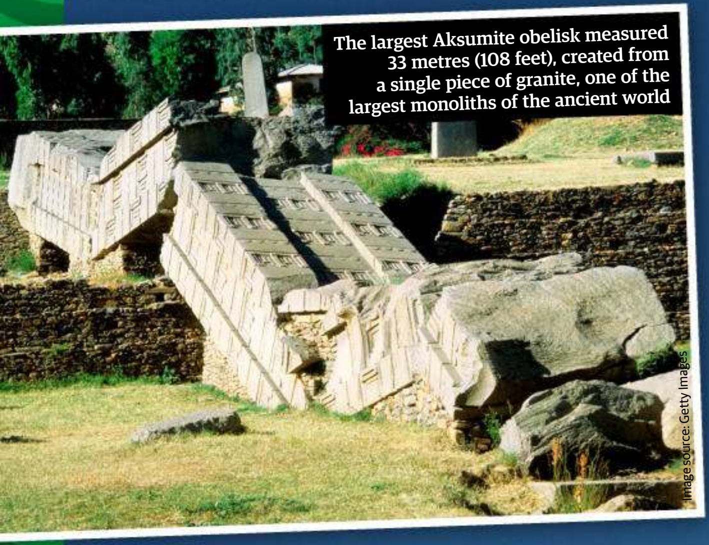
**Ground surface leveL**

How did tombs get under the ground below Al-Khazneh? They didn’t. When the Nabataean dam finally disintegrated, flash flooding returned to the Petra area. The stone and sand deposited by the torrential waters over centuries gradually built up the ground by six or seven metres to today’s level.

**Bore holes**

A line of bore holes frame each side of Al-Khazneh’s façade. Archaeologists surmise that these may have been used for stairs or scaffolding so that the builders could climb up and down from the work platform.

© David Roberts; Wellcome Collection



The largest Aksumite obelisk measured 33 metres (108 feet), created from a single piece of granite, one of the largest monoliths of the ancient world

Image source: Getty Images

Among Aksum's more curious legacies were the enormous granite obelisks, built to mark notable tombs

Image source: Alamy

# The Kingdom of Aksum

*Uniquely situated between the Western and Asiatic worlds, the sub-Saharan kingdom of Aksum grew into the most powerful state between the Roman Empire and Persia*

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

**In the 1st millennium BCE, sub-Saharan Africa was in a state of great migration. The east was transformed as Arabs crossed over the Red Sea, settling down with Kushite farmers, bringing with them the Semitic script. They established trading settlements along the Horn of Africa, buying ivory and shipping it across to Persia and further east via the Indian Ocean – bringing back textiles, spices and silk.**

The city of Aksum was founded in the 1st century CE in the northern highlands of modern Ethiopia. With two annual rainy seasons, this fertile land soon drew scores of settlers from the south to rear cattle and farm. Cereal grew on the hillsides for up to nine months of the year, and the uniquely nutritious Ethiopian grain, teff, flourished even in the absence of rain. Its forests were rich in timber, used to produce charcoal, and the Aksumites terraced hilltops, dug canals, and built dams and cisterns. Shortly after its foundation, a visiting Greek described the city as a "metropolis" – the first recorded use of the word.

According to local oral tradition, the indigenous inhabitants of the region were the Nilo-Saharan-speaking Kunama, who lived in Aksum alongside Semites before being expelled west. The name 'Aksum' probably derives from the Kunama words 'aya' and 'gusma', meaning 'hill' and 'climb'. As the city grew, it developed a civilisation of its own, with an outward-looking perspective.

> "Aksum was described by a contemporary Persian writer as one of the four greatest powers in the world at the time"

Though the port of Adulis on the Red Sea coast of modern Eritrea was a 12-day journey away, the Aksumites grew wealthy trading with the Roman Empire, South Arabia, India, Sri Lanka and even China. Naturally the polity began to dominate its neighbours, expanding its political sphere as far as the Red Sea, where it acted as gatekeeper for luxury goods coming in and out of Africa. By the middle of the 2nd century, Aksum was described by a Greek geographer as the seat of a king's palace.

Having taken Egypt around the same time as Aksum was born, the Roman Empire became a natural trading partner. The Red Sea was the only source capable of meeting Rome's demand for incense, spice, ivory, cinnamon, pepper, cotton cloth, iron and steel. Pliny the Younger also mentioned the trade of slaves, hippopotamus hides and apes. During the 3rd century, as Roman power waned, the East African and Indian Ocean trade routes were controlled by the Arabs and Persians – with the Aksumites dominating their side of the Red Sea coast down to Cape Guardafui.

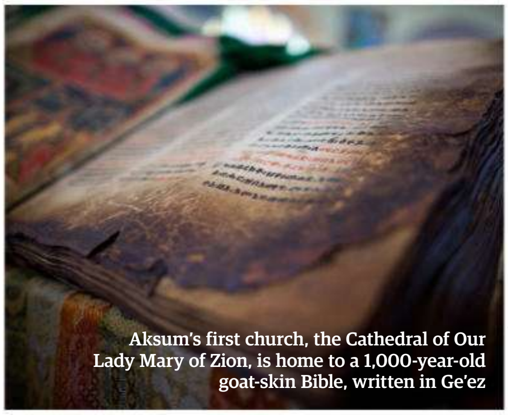
To commemorate its rising status, Aksum became the first sub-Saharan kingdom to mint its own coins, in gold, silver and bronze. Early coinage was adorned with crescents and discs, perhaps inspired by the civilisation's South Arabian roots. Gold coins were minted to Roman weight standards, and adorned with Greek – specifically for international trading purposes. Silver and copper coins, on the other hand, were decorated with the Semitic Ge'ez script. At this time, a Persian religious leader referred to Aksum as one of the world's four great empires.

The Aksumites projected this prestige through monumental obelisks, built to mark the royal necropolis. Their carved designs resembled multi-storey buildings, a fitting tribute to the royals, who lived their lives in three-storey stone palaces. Almost 120 of these adorn the royal graveyard – looming over stone tombs – complete with false doors and horseshoe brick arches. The largest of the obelisks towered some 33 metres high, carved from a single 550-ton block of granite. One of the ancient world's largest monolithic structures, it was carried four kilometres to its site, perhaps with the help of elephants.

At its peak, the city spanned 75 hectares, and was a thriving centre complete with industrial zones, palaces and two-story residential buildings. Palaces boasted stone walls lined with lime or mud, and reinforced with dressed beams. Central pavilions featured paintings and columns, surrounded by courtyards and smaller buildings. Meanwhile, commoners lived in mud houses with thatched roofs.

With no fortified walls, a ceremonial entrance marked the eastern gate, leading to a central temple, with a residential area to the west and a royal cemetery to the north and east. The whole city was surrounded by minor cemeteries and suburbs. Roughly 20,000 people called it home, with the king at the top of a hierarchical society, followed by nobles, priests and then the common craftsmen and farmers.

Traditional Aksumite pottery was handmade and poorly fired, but slipped and finely burnished. Wheel-thrown vessels were imported from the Mediterranean, Arabian Gulf and Nile Valley rather than produced at home. Locals did their best to replicate foreign goods, such as glassware, using parts



Aksum's first church, the Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Zion, is home to a 1,000-year-old goat-skin Bible, written in Ge'ez

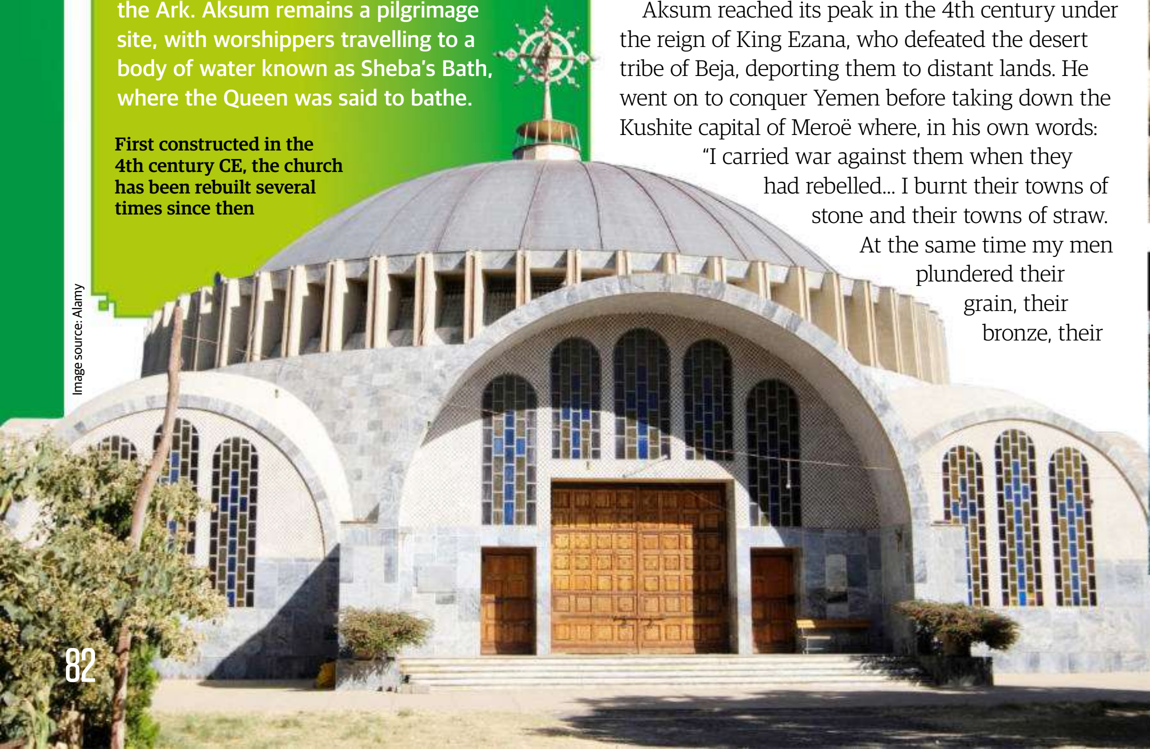
Image source: Getty Images

# The Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Zion

**With the adoption of Christianity, church construction got underway – but one of the new buildings quickly became steeped in myth and legend**

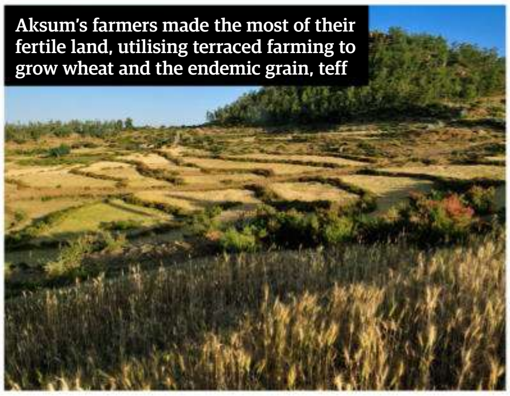
Among the churches built after King Ezana's adoption of the Christian faith was Aksum's own Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Zion, a rectangular basilica built upon a stepped podium. Facing the church is a set of granite thrones, symbolising either 12 Aksumite judges, or the Nine Saints and some Christian kings. The Patriarch of Alexandria elected an Egyptian Copt as the Archbishop of the Ethiopian Church, a tradition that has continued to this day. Rebuilt as a crenellated Gondarine-style building in the 17th century, it hosts a sacred room, with doors depicting angels with swords, said to hold the Ark of the Covenant – the fabled chest believed to contain the original tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments.

Ethiopian legend claims the Ark was brought there by Menelik – the lovechild of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, who formed the country's Solomonic dynasty. Today it is watched over by a guardian monk – appointed for life. During the annual festival of Timkat, celebrating Christ's baptism, Ethiopian priests parade replicas of the Ark. Aksum remains a pilgrimage site, with worshippers travelling to a body of water known as Sheba's Bath, where the Queen was said to bathe.



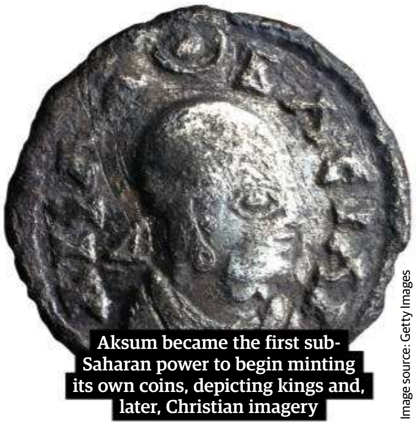
First constructed in the 4th century CE, the church has been rebuilt several times since then

Image source: Alamy



Aksum's farmers made the most of their fertile land, utilising terraced farming to grow wheat and the endemic grain, teff

Image source: Alamy



Aksum became the first sub-Saharan power to begin minting its own coins, depicting kings and, later, Christian imagery

Image source: Getty Images

> "Orthodox Christianity was fully embraced by Aksum in the 4th century CE by King Ezana"

of broken imports. They also crafted standardised flaked stone tools, used to process raw materials from ivory to hides. The Aksumites mastered the arts of basic smelting and forging, crafting an array of specialist metal tools used to produce ivory artefacts, often adorned with intertwined vines and animals with distinctive features.

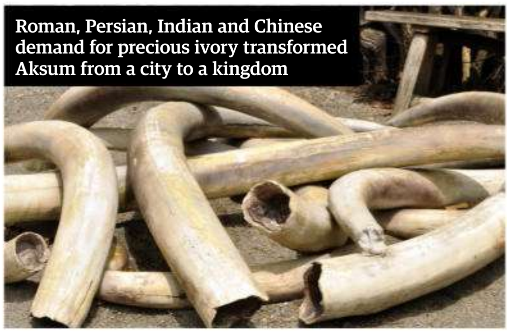
Pieces such as the Venus of Aksum, found in a 3rd-century elite grave, hint at an upper-class appreciation of Graeco-Roman aesthetics. Ivory was immensely popular across the Roman Empire, Arabia, India and China, and with the North African elephant on the brink of extinction, Aksum was well positioned to capitalise on its own abundant elephant population – with herds of reportedly up to 5,000. However, this pushed it into an economic war with its northwestern neighbour, the kingdom of Kush.

Aksum reached its peak in the 4th century under the reign of King Ezana, who defeated the desert tribe of Beja, deporting them to distant lands. He went on to conquer Yemen before taking down the Kushite capital of Meroë where, in his own words: "I carried war against them when they had rebelled… I burnt their towns of stone and their towns of straw. At the same time my men plundered their grain, their bronze, their iron and their copper, destroyed the idols in their homes, their stocks of corn and of cotton; and they threw themselves into the river."

His kingdom became an empire, with a dozen cities stretching from the Nile Valley to the Yemeni highlands.

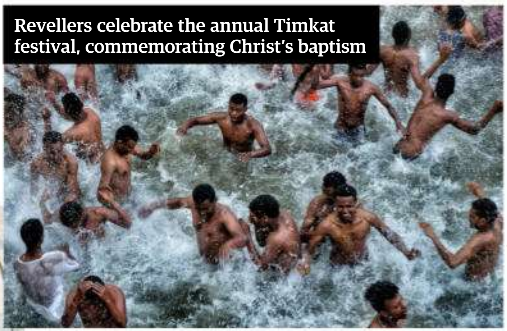
Long inscriptions written in Greek and Semitic celebrated his conquests at great length, as well as his bold decision to depart from Aksum's traditional religion. Early Aksumites practised an indigenous, monotheistic faith, worshipping the god Mahrem, from whom their kings were descended. Animism and ancestor-worship also played a role in spirituality, with sacrifices such as a dozen oxen offered to their spirits alongside Mahrem and Ares, his equivalent, the Greek god of war.

However, in around 330 Ezana was baptised by the Syrian monk Frumentius of Tyre. Aksum became one of the earliest Christian states, converting just five years after Constantine made it Rome's official religion at the Council of Nicaea. Christianity quickly took root among royals and traders before funnelling down to the commoners. The state later sent missionaries to the neighbouring Kingdom of Alwa.



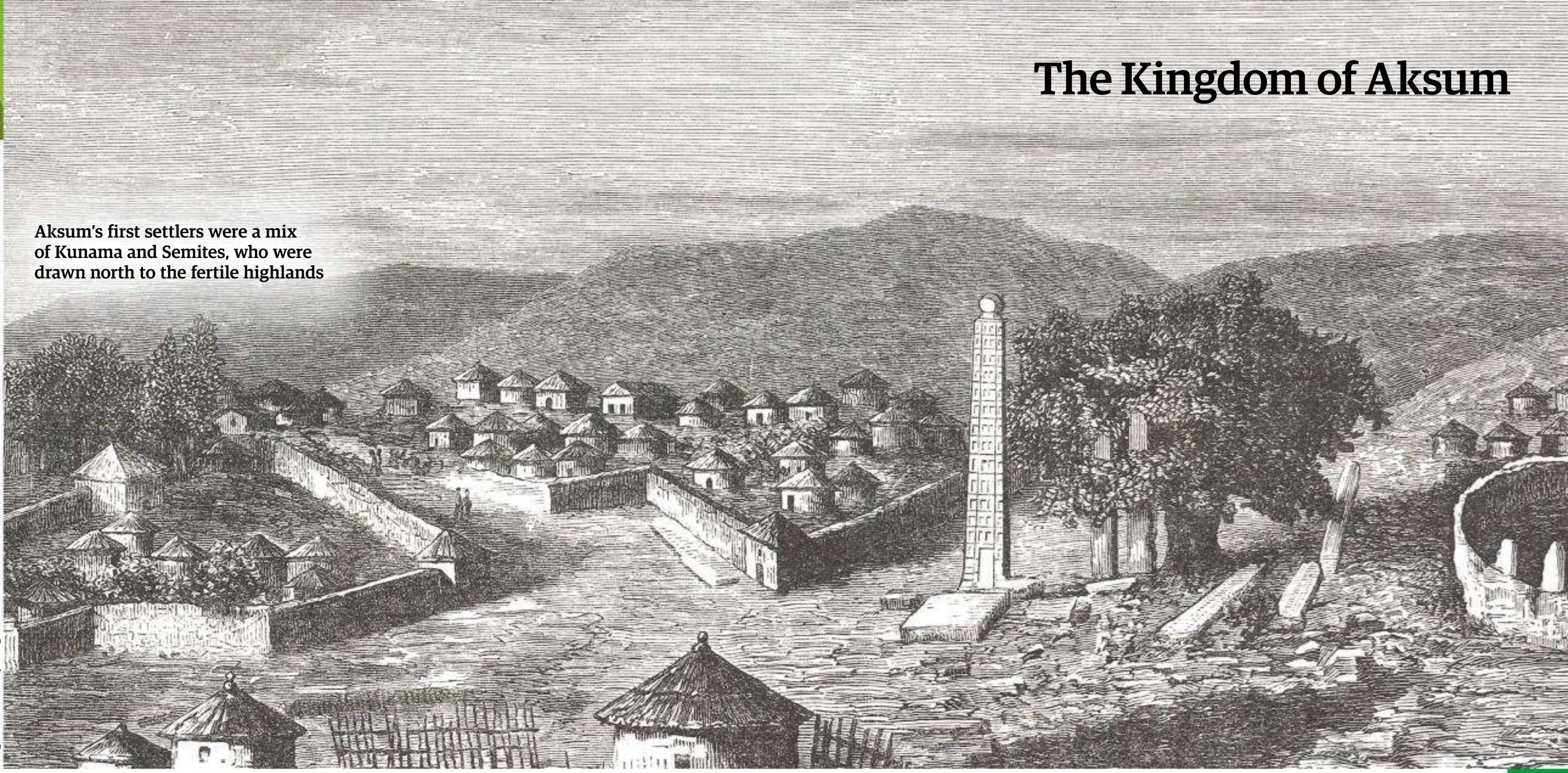
Roman, Persian, Indian and Chinese demand for precious ivory transformed Aksum from a city to a kingdom

Image source: Alamy



Revellers celebrate the annual Timkat festival, commemorating Christ's baptism

Image source: Getty Images



Aksum's first settlers were a mix of Kunama and Semites, who were drawn north to the fertile highlands

Image source: Getty Images

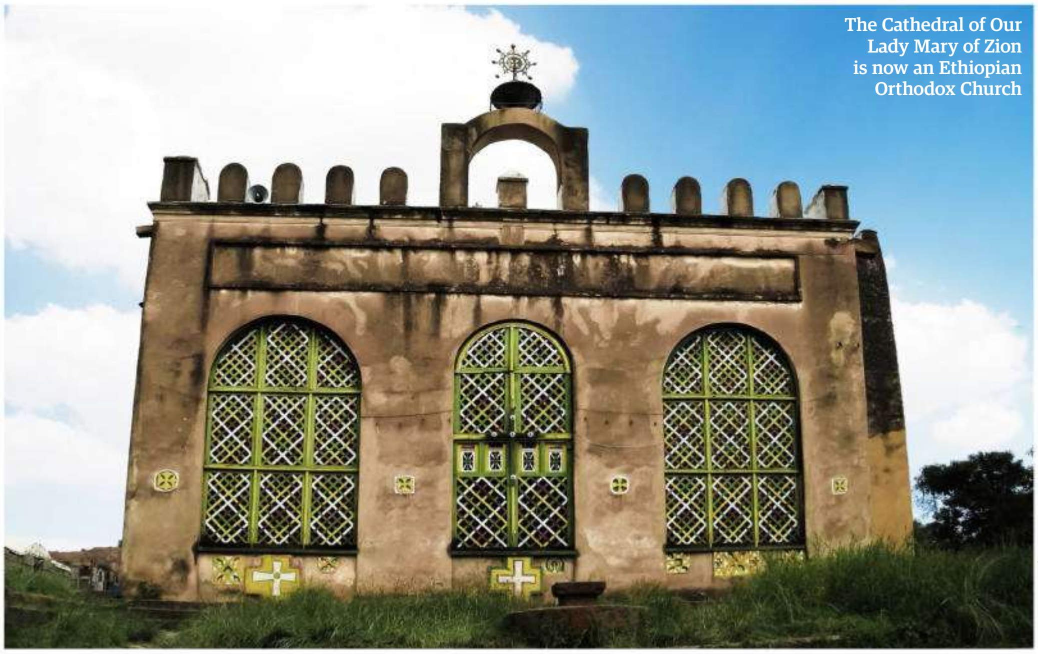
The conversion led to a transformation of Aksumite coinage, pottery, burial traditions and architecture. Coins were now adorned with the Christian cross, along with the king's likeness, an image of teff and the inscription: "May the country be satisfied." Others said "Joy and peace to the people" and "He conquers through Christ". Aksumite minters began replacing gold coins with copper ones, innovating gilding methods to decorate crowns and other symbols with gold leaf.

In the 5th century, despite the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the kingdom enjoyed a rapid development boom – attributed by later Ethiopians to the 'Nine Saints', who founded the churches and monasteries outside the kingdom's capital. Emboldened, the 6th-century ruler King Kaleb sent an army to Yemen to liberate Christians from persecution. While this resulted in new territories and a closer bond with the Byzantine emperor Justin I, it had proved a costly enterprise, marking the start of the kingdom's steady decline. Things were only made worse by the trade disruptions caused by the Persian invasions of Yemen, Jerusalem and Alexandria.

With the arrival of Islam, the Aksumites and Muslims briefly enjoyed an amicable relationship – with an Aksumite king granting refuge to a group of Muslims during the First Hijra in around 615. However, as the religion flourished, the Arabians took total control of the Red Sea and cut it off from the Mediterranean. Shortly after, the Aksumites were forced to move their capital eastwards, with Aksum itself surviving into the modern age as a religious and coronation site.

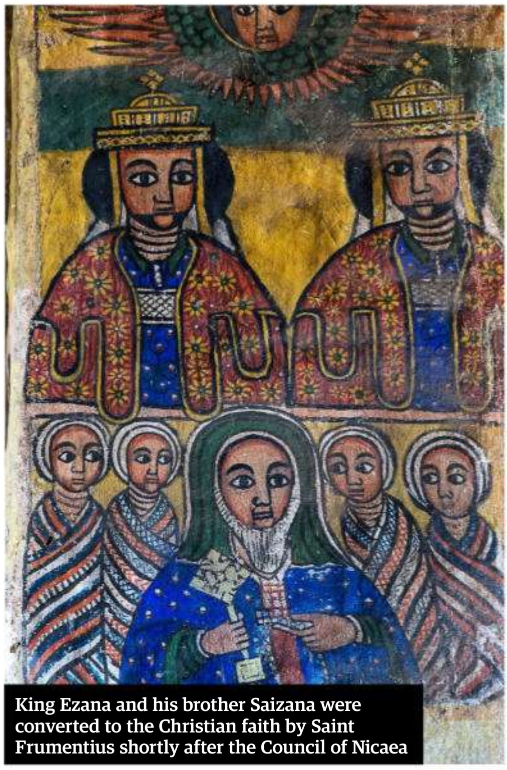
With the ensuing Arab destruction of Adulis, the Aksumites, whose entire economy was modelled on international trade, were strangled – confining them to their agricultural highlands, a forced migration that coincided with a massive drop in rainfall. Before long the area was abandoned, decaying into a handful of villages and monasteries as power shifted southwards, where Aksumite aesthetics were reborn in the medieval rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.

While Aksum began as a self-sufficient farming community, when it rapidly blossomed into a merchant kingdom, its greatest source of strength became its greatest weakness. As a uniquely powerful sub-Saharan civilisation dependent upon the international status quo, perhaps its reach exceeded its grasp – like its greatest obelisk, which came tumbling down under its own weight, the foundation simply was not strong enough.



The Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Zion is now an Ethiopian Orthodox Church

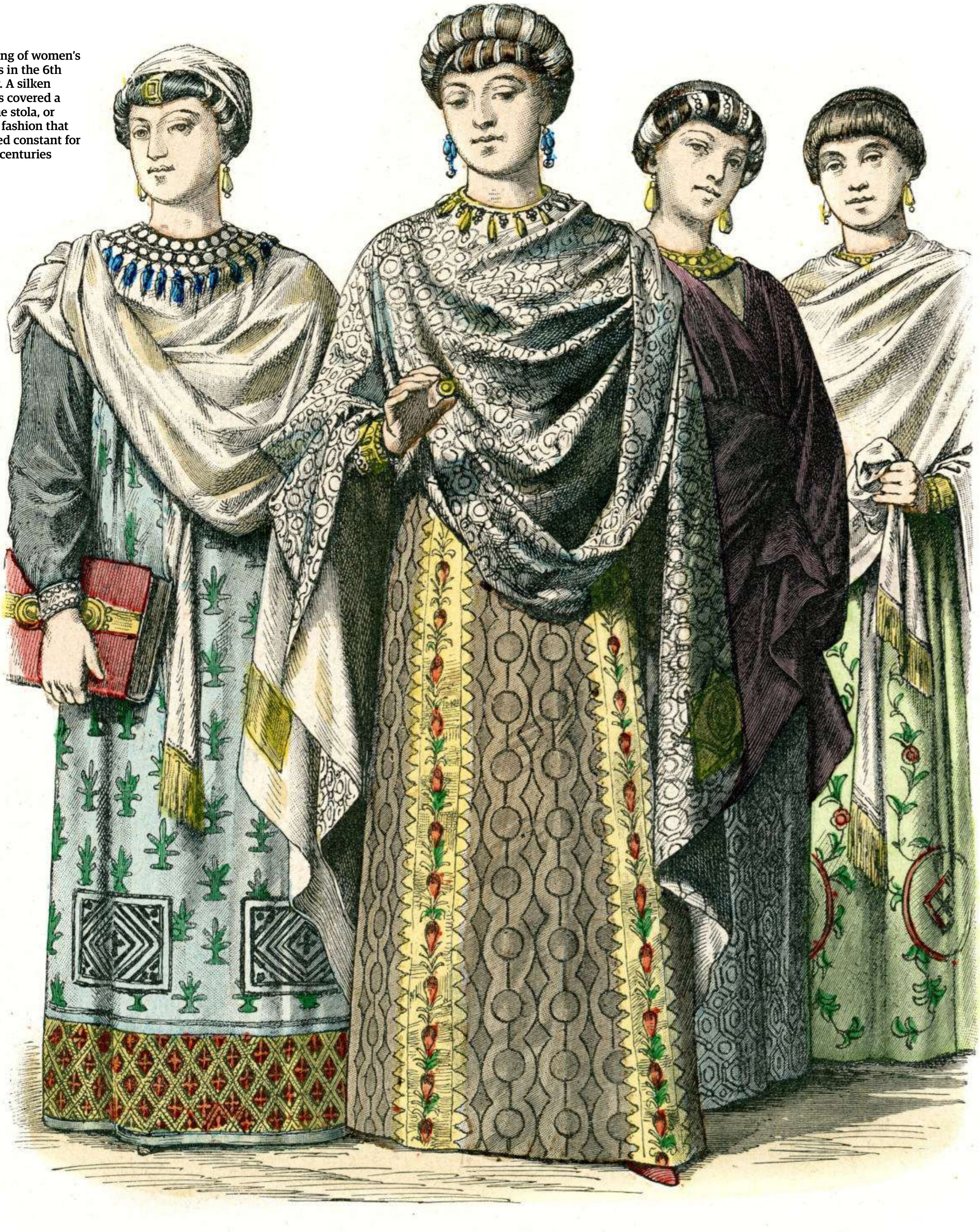
Image source: Alamy



King Ezana and his brother Saizana were converted to the Christian faith by Saint Frumentius shortly after the Council of Nicaea

Image source: Alamy

Engraving of women's fashions in the 6th century. A silken chlamys covered a feminine stola, or tunic, a fashion that remained constant for several centuries


Gefolge der Kaiſerin Theodora. (547.)

# The Byzantine silk monopoly

## *The surviving eastern half of the Roman Empire extended the end of the Silk Road by stealing its secrets and protecting them from all others*

Written by Nathan Websdale

**The needs of the 6th century Mediterranean elite for access to the luxurious silks of the East would drive the two competing empires of Rome and Persia to open war. Persia under the Sassanid dynasty (224-651) held a huge land border to their east where their merchants from Sogdia, modern Uzbekistan, bought their silks from the Chinese and began the long road to the west where their silks could be sold to the highest bidder. The Persian shahs recognised the value of their position and strictly regulated the export prices of silk to their major rival, the surviving eastern half of the Roman Empire, which is known to history as Byzantium.**

A series of governmental proscriptions, price settings, struggles for outposts, black markets and eventual smuggling typified the contest to sate the tastes of Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, situated at the westernmost point of the Silk Road. The city, with its population of a million inhabitants, dwarfed any other in contemporary Europe and served as a trading entrepôt for luxury goods. Within its impenetrable triple walls, many exotic goods such as spices, perfumes, furs and jewels were gathered, transformed and sold; but it was in silk that the Byzantines most uniquely captured the distinction of their culture that separated them from 'hoi barbaroi', the barbarians, beyond. The wealthiest of the empire spent small fortunes on the creation of their garments, after Rome recognised silk's strength and suitability to warm climates and its ability to be woven into both iconic and aniconic depictions, dyeing silk for their court dress, purple being the most illustrious, as the robes of the capital's populace conveyed their ability to procure materials from far away.

Byzantine desire for silk was a consequence of imperial eastwards expansion during the High Roman period when the empire's conquests of the Eastern Mediterranean and Ptolemaic Egypt secured them a number of ports on the Red Sea. Persians never produced their own silk, they bought it further east, and it was in Byzantine interest to cut out the middleman. In Southern Arabia, with the aid of a Hellenised seafaring elite, Rome began a lucrative trading partnership with the Indian port of Bharuch and began to appear in Chinese sources c.116 CE as part of a rewarding but limited trade. The empire considered the island of Iotabe, off the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, to be of significance and fostered a colony of traders on the briefly inhabited island. When its local leader rebelled and declared himself independent in 498 the Byzantines sent their most southernmost ever military expedition

> "The city, with its population of a million inhabitants, dwarfed any other in Europe and served as a trading entrepôt for luxury goods"

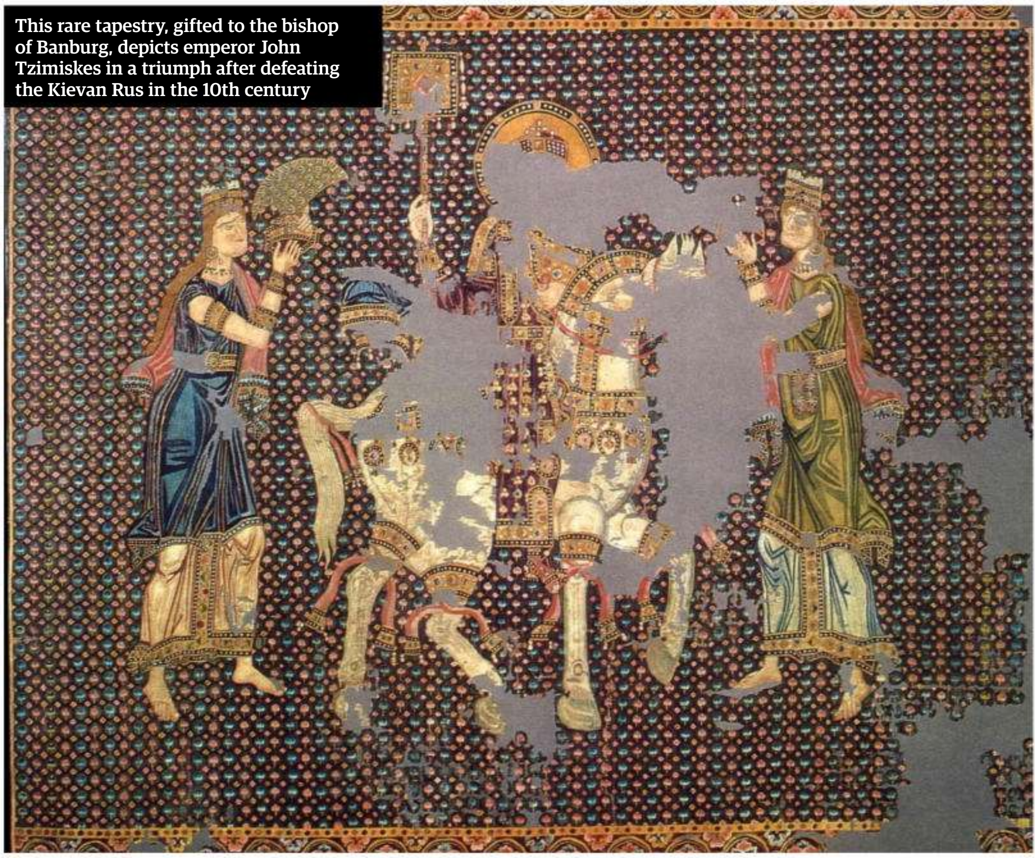
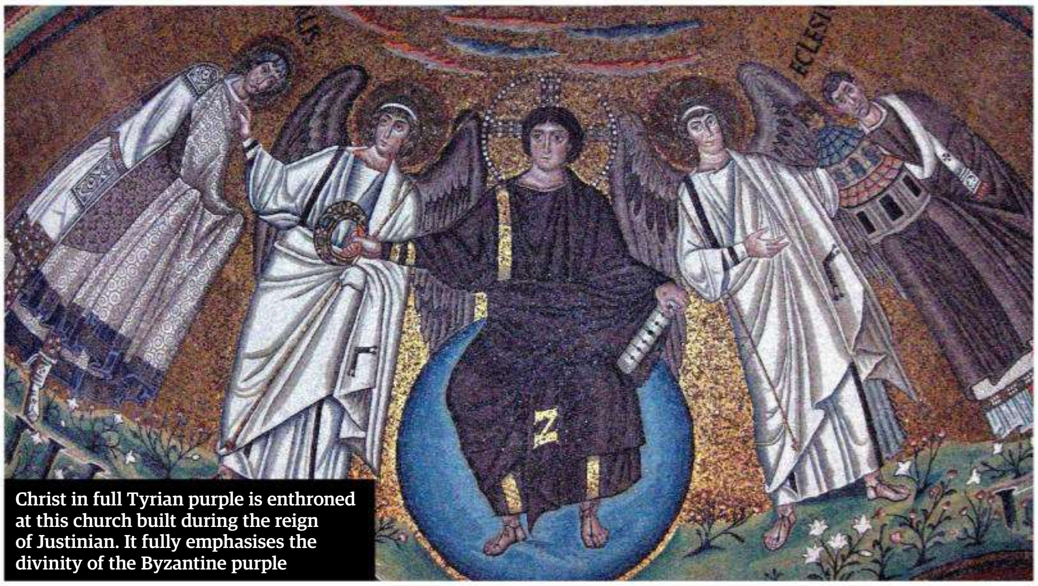

This rare tapestry, gifted to the bishop of Banburg, depicts emperor John Tzimiskes in a triumph after defeating the Kievan Rus in the 10th century

Image source: Alamy

to restore their chosen governor, and through the tradition of tribute and titles deputised the king of the Arabian Ghassanid dynasty to defend the Red Sea coast. The second Silk Road that snaked across the Northern Caucasus and deposited into the Black Sea maritime cities was similarly safeguarded and exploited by nomadic Turkic tribes of the steppes in exchange for other goods. Good relations and even alliances between these groups and the Byzantines could have dire consequences for the Persians who in consequence went to war to secure the Caspian Gates in the Caucasus and ensure the tribes stayed beyond both empires' borders.


Christ in full Tyrian purple is enthroned at this church built during the reign of Justinian. It fully emphasises the divinity of the Byzantine purple

It was during the reign of the emperor Justinian the Great (527-565) that the Byzantine silk trade underwent a metamorphosis. The sea routes opened by earlier generations had whet the appetites of the Romans but the war that broke out with Persia c.527 made apparent the need for a more permanent solution to the issues raised as the Persians increased their tariffs. Justinian tried multiple schemes. Negotiations for the Ethiopian kings to increase their naval scope in the sub-Arabian trade came to nought when their resources proved insufficient. Legislation that was eventually introduced preventing his subjects' overspending on silk by restricting the trade to the three cities of Nisibis, Callinicum and Artaxata in 529 reportedly led to migration to Persia in protest. An appointed official, the Kommerkiarios, was sent to oversee the process, and the plethora of seals found across the Levant give an idea of the scope of his activities. The silk industry was firmly entrenched in Byzantium with the cities of Beirut and Tyre in Phoenicia named as key commercial centres when the emperor's wars forced the silk merchants to sell their goods at hugely inflated prices. Justinian signed the not so aptly named treaty of 'Perpetual Peace' with the Persians in 532, which lasted less than a decade following the Persian shah's death, but the empire's solution to the silk trade and Byzantine subjects benefitting the Persian state coffers came from an altogether unlikely source.

Procopius, who in turn served as imperial secretary to the empire's leading general, state historian of overbearing imperial panegyric and writer of anti-Justinian libel all in one busy lifetime, has preserved how it was that the Byzantines broke the Persian monopoly on silk. He wrote that "there came from India certain monks… they promised the emperor in an interview that they would provide the materials for making silk so that never should the Romans seek business of this kind from their enemy the Persians, or from any other people whatsoever." With a little conjecture we now believe that in the 550s those monks came from India to Constantinople to provide the empire with a solution. Conjecturally, these were Nestorian monks who had led missions to China and seen the practice personally, and they promised to smuggle silkworm eggs to Constantinople disguised within bamboo canes and covered with dung for warmth. Their successful return along with a party of skilled Chinese slaves altered the Silk Road forever.

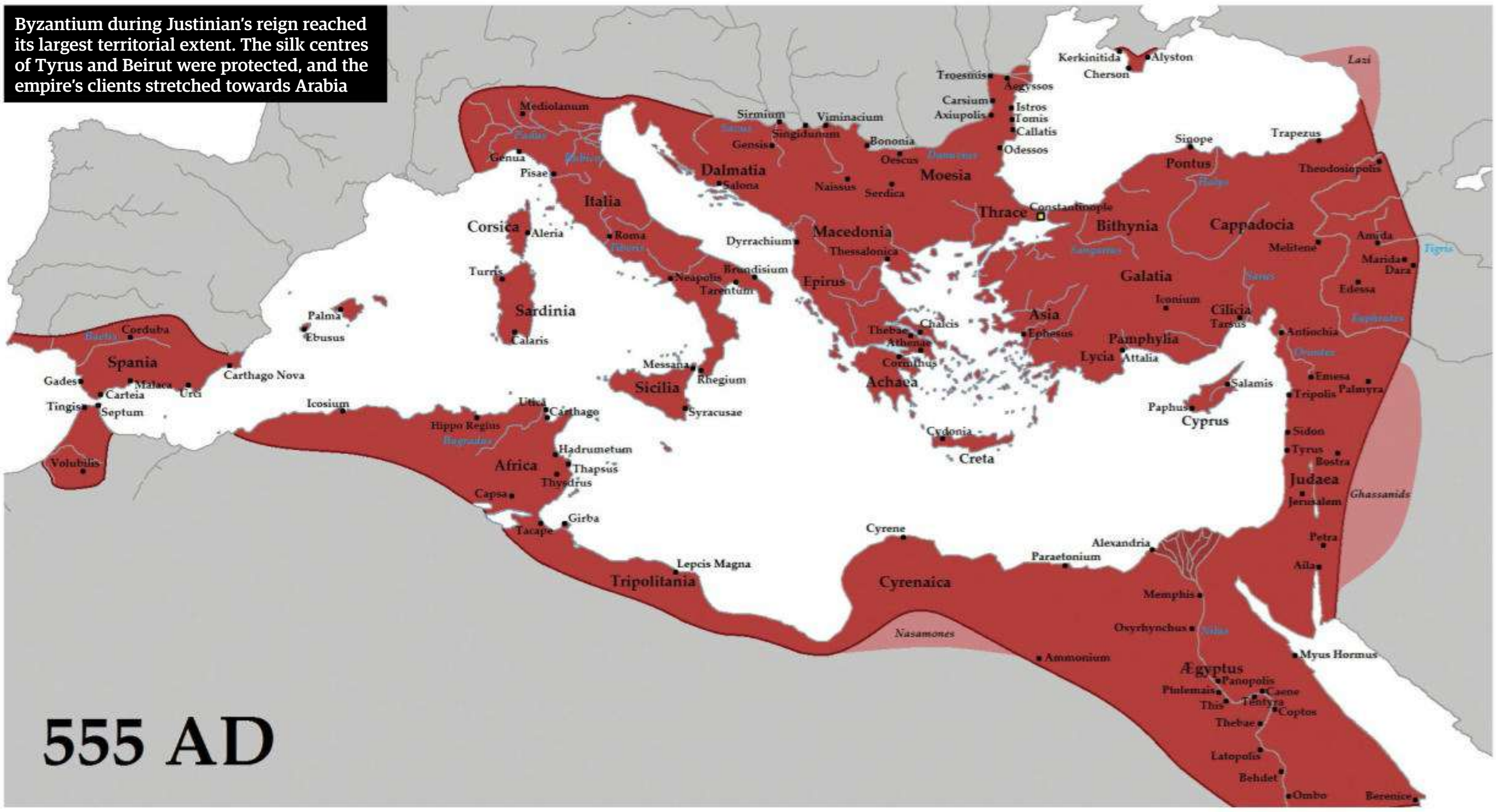
No longer at the mercy of Persia, Constantinople at last began to produce the raw silk to match Byzantine demand. The process was slow and stuttering as the number of silkworms transported was few, but by the start of the eighth century, Constantinople was the source of raw silk throughout Byzantium, providing the yarn for

### Royal gifts from the emperor

**As a sign of imperial generosity, the Byzantine emperor could choose to grant silken garments and cloth to allies and enemies of the state. Its purpose was manifold; within Byzantium the silken chlamys worn over the tunic was a cloak of state rank, and ideologically the Byzantines preserved the conception of a world order that placed the emperor at the heart of a universal empire. By bestowing cloths with even a purple border, the receiver would be both astounded at the value of the gift and an extended member of the Byzantine court. One of these gifts is preserved today as the core and oldest portion of the Kingdom of Hungary's Coronation Mantle. The Byzantines originally gifted King Stephen I (997–1038) the one-piece robe for his coronation and it remained in use for over 300 years. Other gifts were offered to the kings of Bulgaria, France and Germany. Interestingly, according to the account of his daughter, the emperor Alexios Komnenos sent a cloth of blattia purple, the most expensive of all, to Henry IV the emperor of Germany, which eventually decorated his tomb.**

Image source: Wiki

The beautifully woven piece is embroidered with golden thread to show both King Stephen at his coronation and the world order of Christ who, placed at the top of the gown with his feet planted over two dragons, looks over king and saint alike. The scale of ornamentation and embroidery is immense and can only have come from an imperial workshop


555 AD
Spania
Corsica
Sardinia
Italia
Sicilia
Africa
Tripolitania
Cyrenaica
Dalmatia
Moesia
Macedonia
Thrace
Epirus
Achaea
Creta
Asia
Bithynia
Pontus
Cappadocia
Galatia
Cilicia
Pamphylia
Lycia
Cyprus
Judaea
Ægyptus
Constantinople
Alexandria
Carthago Nova
Carthago
Roma
Ravenna
Mediolanum
Thessalonica
Athenae
Corinthus
Antiochia
Tyrus
Sidon
Jerusalem
Petra
Memphis
Lazi
Ghassanids
Nasamones

Byzantium during Justinian's reign reached its largest territorial extent. The silk centres of Tyrus and Beirut were protected, and the empire's clients stretched towards Arabia

the numerous silk centres that developed across the empire. Major textual sources speak at length about the protection of silk, now classed as a state secret, and how it was used. The book of Byzantine ceremonies has a great amount of detail about the process by which court officials were to be invested with their ceremonial silken robes.

Meeting this demand, and notable for the scale of its material survival today, is the city of Thebes in Boeotia, in central Greece, where the provincial city's role as a centre of silk weaving, dyeing and tailoring is preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Thebes. Examples are preserved of both process and product. The weavers were classed as a guild by the Book of the Eparch, essentially Constantinople's mercantile overseer, and this group which numbered both men and women were labelled as serikarioi, after the Byzantine Greek word for silk, serikon. This group's skill at transforming the yarn into cloth with looms, combs and wooden cylinders was valued such that at one point any man found "corrupting" a female textile worker from her work was to be fined. This silk fabric was then dyed using a number of materials, some with an origin as exotic as the thread itself. The dyeing process was even more multi-ethnic and included substantial numbers of Jewish merchants from the various enclaves dotted around the empire. One visiting rabbi, Benjamin of Tudela, noted that there were 2,000 Jews working in the silk industry in Thebes and Greece alone.

The most exclusive of all dyes these merchants produced was known as blattia and was the collected secretion of the molluscs native to Tyrus, Lebanon. Blattia was used for the highest quality purple silks that by the sixth century were deemed suitable only for depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mother and God's representative on Earth, the Byzantine emperor himself. Mosaics showing holy figures in Byzantine dress often share a common feature – the purple robe of rulership that defined the imperial family. That the Byzantines were the sole producer of silk and guarded its secrets from Western Europe, outside of royal gifts, made it as precious to Europeans as it had been for the Byzantines pre-Justinian. The Normans, who conquered southern Italy from the Byzantines, in the 12th century finally broke this monopoly when in 1147 they sacked Thebes, Athens and Corinth, and took back to Sicily as prisoners the silk workers who had held the Byzantine secrets of 500 years. Thence, after a pause of half a millennium, the Silk Road continued its stretch westwards.

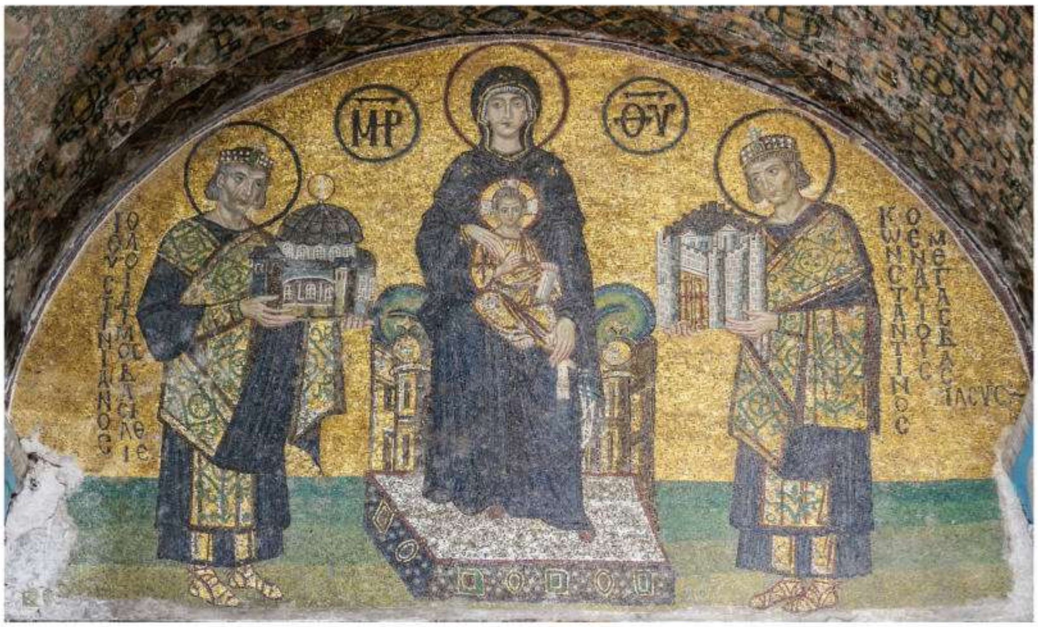


Image source: Wiki © Bjorn Christiantorrissen

# The lost city of Ani

## *Once the capital of a kingdom, Ani was known as the City of 1,001 Churches. Today, only a ghost town remains within its crumbling walls*

**Written by Catherine Curzon**

**On the border between Turkey and Armenia lie the ruins of a city that was once the capital of a mighty nation. Today its bustling streets are silent and lost, laid waste by invasion and time, its magnificent churches and citadel reduced to rubble. This is Ani, the 'City of 1,001 Churches'.**

In the 11th century, the greatest dynasty in Armenia were the Bagratuni, ruled by Ashot III, the Merciful. In 961 CE he purchased Ani from the Kamsarakan dynasty, with whom the Bagratuni had long vied for power, and named this new acquisition as the capital of his extensive realm. At first, Ani was only a fortress, which had been established since the 5th century, and a modest town clustered around the hill on which it was situated. However, Ashot recognised the strategic importance of his newest acquisition, which commanded views of the surrounding lands and river. The trade routes of the Silk Road close by – reaching the continent in all directions, leading into into the Byzantine Empire, Asia, Persia and the further reaches of the east – played a vital role in establishing Ani as a major commercial hub.

The city grew at an incredible rate. It was a place of rich pickings and opportunities, where the streets rang with the cries of merchants passing between nations great and small. Built as a royal capital, Ani stood between Christian and Muslim lands and was a melting pot of cultures and nationalities. It also appeared to be impregnable. Standing on a triangular mountain plateau, naturally formed where two canyons met, Ani was notoriously difficult to access. The only ways in were the city gates, and with all points of the compass other than the north occupied by deep canyons, the options for potential invaders were limited. To further improve the security of important buildings, they were built along the edges of the canyons, with the city protected by walls of near 50 feet in height, protected by more than two dozen defensive towers.

Ani wasn't just a textbook example of defensive structures, but a place that was intended to inspire awe, as recorded by European travellers to the region. Monument walls and those of the city itself were constructed of tuff stone, a rock that was also favoured by the Romans. Tuff stone takes on a variety of colours and with an assortment of hues including orange, black and different shades of red, brown and grey, the whole city resembled a vast mosaic. Enormous crosses were picked out in different coloured stone in the walls of buildings, and the numerous places of worship were decorated with ornate carvings. It was a city of stone, with no wood or metal used at all in its construction. The infrastructure was the height of Medieval achievement too, with drainage, fresh water and even streetlighting all paid for via taxes charged to the merchants who enjoyed lucrative business in the city.

Though the bustling streets weren't exactly paved with gold, the city must have been a magnificent sight, a colourful patchwork standing at the pinnacle of the plateau against a mountainous backdrop. People poured in from every corner of Armenia, hoping to find a new life in the capital city, and it became a vibrant centre of trade and government. Inevitably, the Armenian Catholic Church made its headquarters in Ani, and by the 11th century, hundreds of members of the clergy could be found among a population that now numbered over 100,000 souls.

Ani fell out of the hands of its founding family in 1041, when its ruler, Hovhannes-Sembat, bequeathed

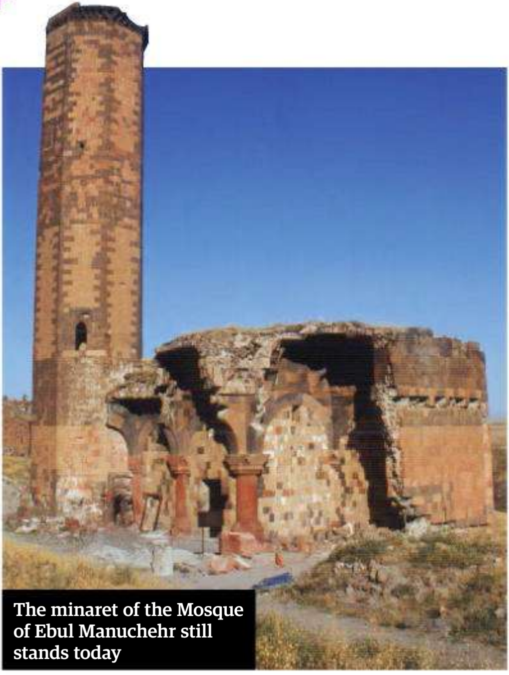

The minaret of the Mosque of Ebul Manuchehr still stands today

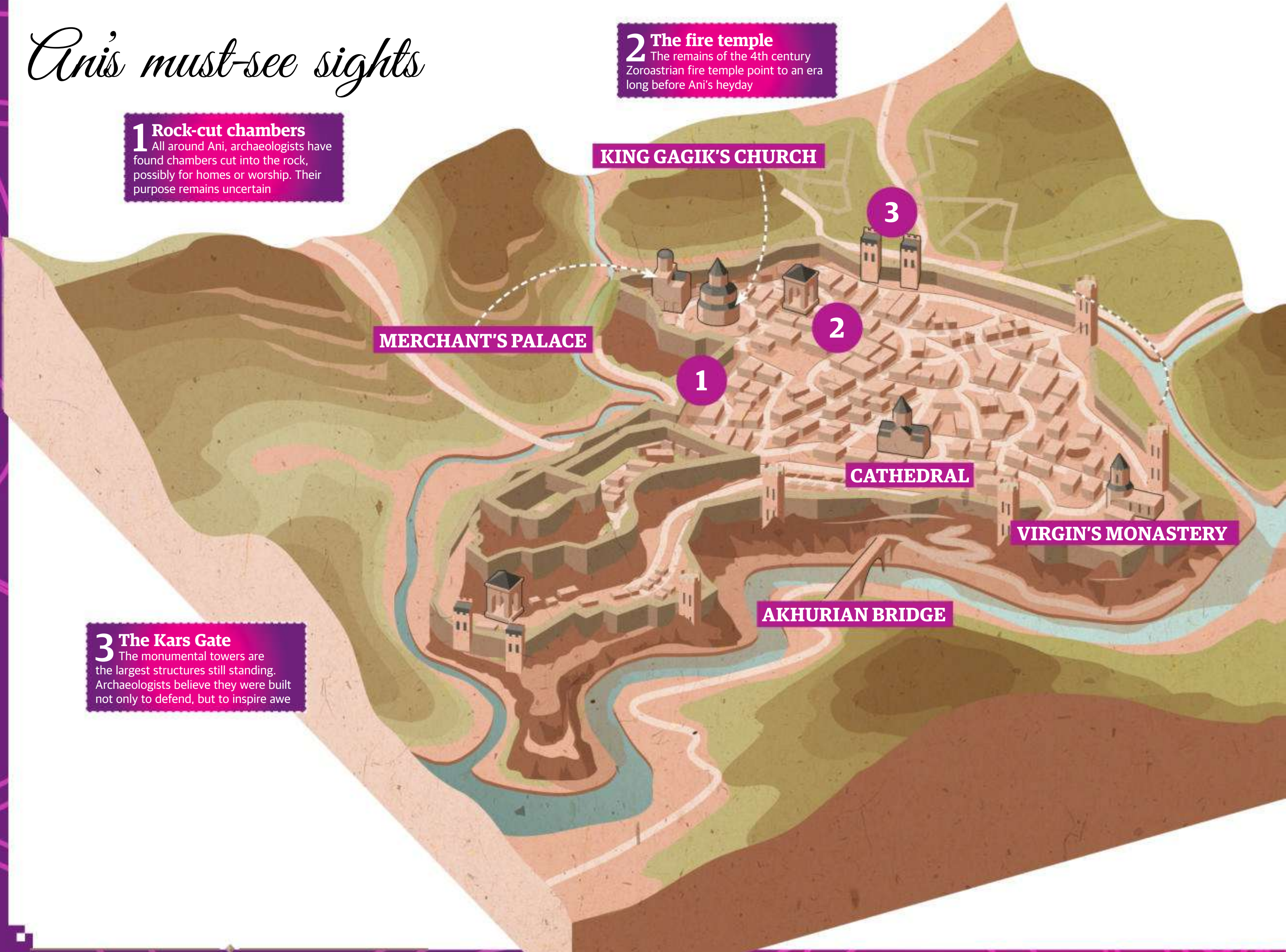
Image source: Wiki

his dominions to the Byzantine Empire. When he died and the people baulked at being taken into the empire, Byzantine emperor Michael IV sent an army in to make his point. The troops met unexpected fierce resistance from a populace who loved their city, yet they were outnumbered. The Byzantine Empire besieged Ani, killing thousands before the city surrendered in 1045. Yet Ani didn't stay in the empire for long, and little more than 25 years after its surrender to Michael IV, Ani was captured by the Turkish Seljuk. The invasion was brutal and the city was pillaged, its inhabitants slain or taken prisoner.

From that moment, Ani's future became uncertain. It was passed from ruler to ruler, kingdom to kingdom, until it returned to prosperity under the rule of Georgia's Queen Tamar. Unfortunately, this new prosperity and its strategic importance made Ani a tempting prospect for raiding parties, and when the Mongol invasions began in 1237, the beleaguered, occasionally butchered, population packed up and began to move on, leaving their great city behind. A mighty earthquake shook the city to its foundations in 1319, and its Mongol rulers did nothing to repair the damage, beginning Ani's architectural decline. With nothing left in Ani but its proud history and the crumbling remains of once-magnificent architecture, the exodus from a city once known up and down the Silk Roads for its splendour began.

> **The once-magnificent structures at Ani are constructed using the local volcanic basalt, a sort of tufa stone**

## *Ani's must-see sights*



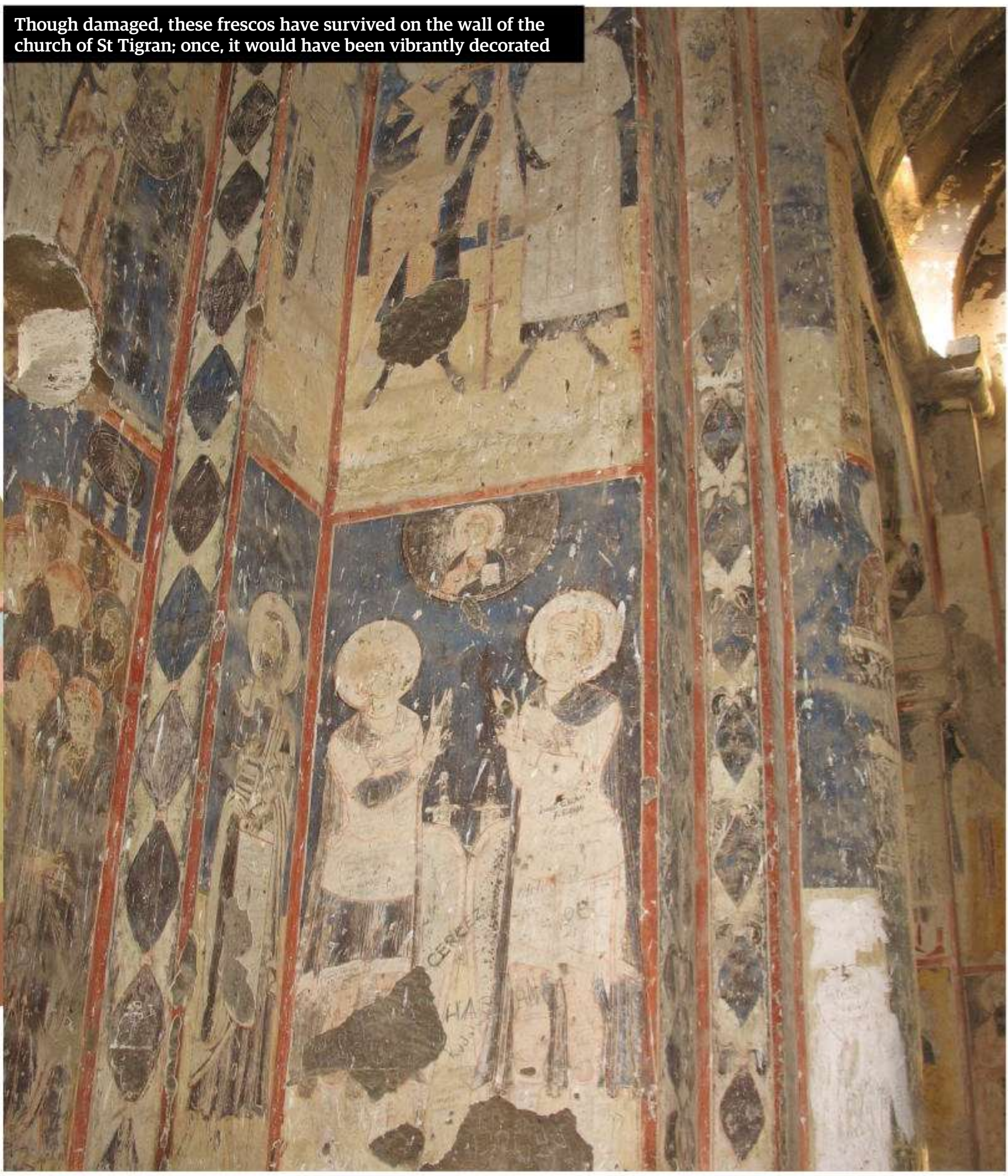
**1 Rock-cut chambers** All around Ani, archaeologists have found chambers cut into the rock, possibly for homes or worship. Their purpose remains uncertain

**2 The fire temple** The remains of the 4th century Zoroastrian fire temple point to an era long before Ani's heyday

**3 The Kars Gate** The monumental towers are the largest structures still standing. Archaeologists believe they were built not only to defend, but to inspire awe

The mosque offers incredible views of the surrounding landscape

Image source: Getty



Though damaged, these frescos have survived on the wall of the church of St Tigran; once, it would have been vibrantly decorated

Image source: Wiki © Ego Tigris

# Damaged by its protectors

## A fence designed to protect the historic site has ended up causing a destructive level of neglect to the abandoned city

By the turn of the millennium, the once-breathtaking city of Ani had succumbed to a rather more humble fate, becoming a a favourite site for locals to graze their cattle. As part of its commitment to protect the site, the Turkish government misguidedly erected a fence to ensure that no unauthorised visitors could gain access to the site. In 2002, they completed the installation of a three-metre-tall fence of wire mesh that was topped with barbed wire, held in place by concrete posts that had their foundations deep in the earth.

Sadly, the fence did far more damage than the grazing animals that it was intended to keep out. In order to completely encircle the site, it was necessary to lay down a new road, and construction vehicles rattled through the city day in, day out, flattening the land in their path. To make sure that the posts were secure, deep foundations were drilled down and filled with concrete, with no thought for the damage being wrought to the by-now delicate ruins. Ani is no stranger to fences though, and situated as it is on the still-controversial Armenian-Turkish border, visitors can stand on the edge of the city and look out at the guard towers that were once symbols of the Cold War. Today, Armenian border guards patrol there rather than their Russian counterparts, but it's a sobering reminder that even centuries later, the territory around Ani is still contested.

Ironically, although the cattle that once grazed Ani were now unable to enter, it was soon discovered that they were doing far more good than harm. Without them to keep the vegetation down, it has overgrown and swamped many of the small ruins.

Ani is on the contested border between Turkey and Armenia

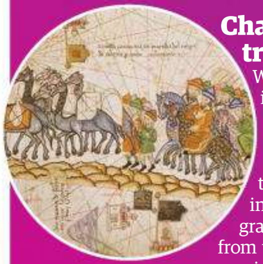
Image source: Wiki © Enrico Colina Fence

# Why was Ani abandoned?

What caused this rich, well-placed Silk Road city to be abandoned by its inhabitants? Here are the possible explanations

### The big one

A popular theory regarding the abandonment of Ani is that it was virtually wiped out by an earthquake in 1319, causing the survivors to flee their homes. Though there was a quake, it didn't empty the city.



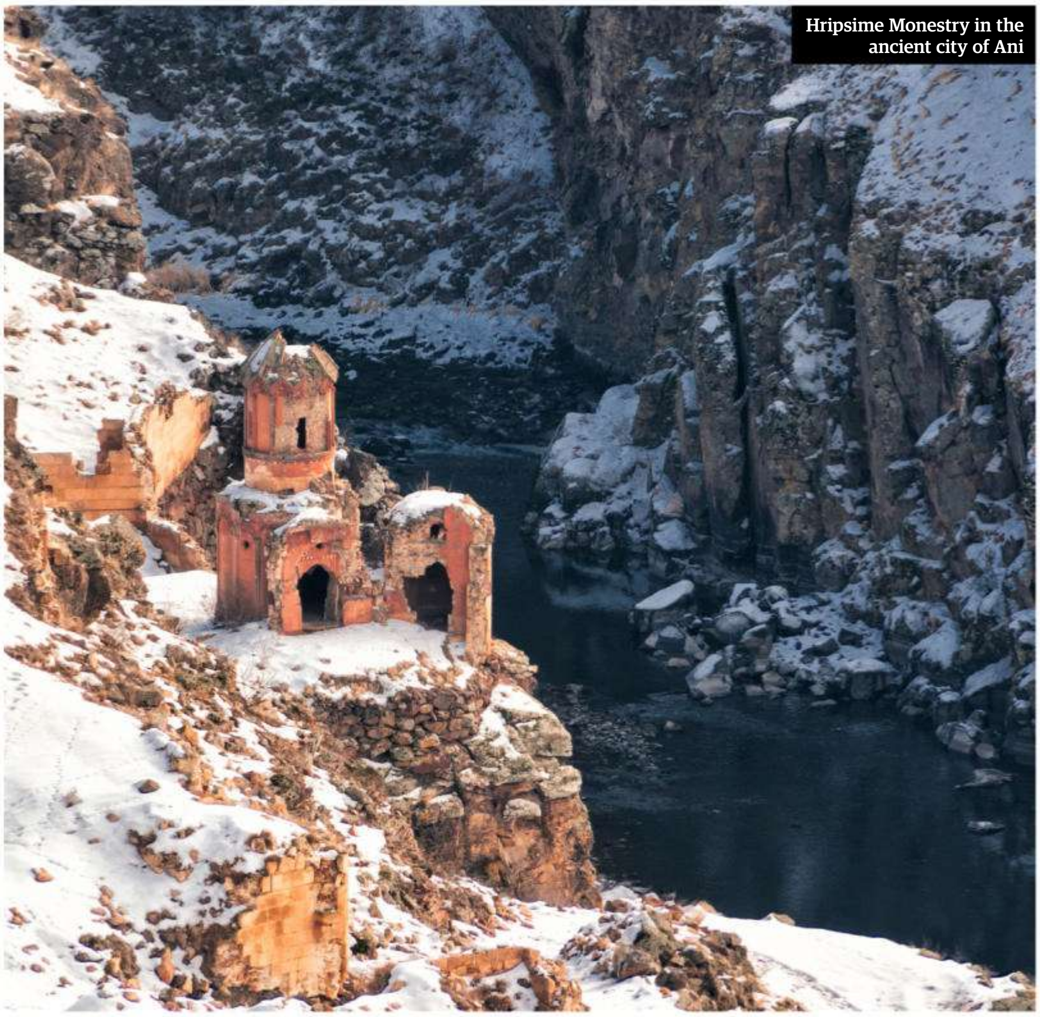
### Changing trade routes

With seemingly constant invasions and siege, the rich traders and merchants of the east didn't fancy risking their lives in Ani. Their influence saw the roads gradually move away from the city, robbing it of its economic clout.

### Civil war

Sitting on the border of both Turkey and Armenia, Ani was the first port of call for nomadic groups looking to pillage. After decades of watching their backs, the people eventually had enough.

All insets source: Wiki



Hripsime Monestry in the ancient city of Ani

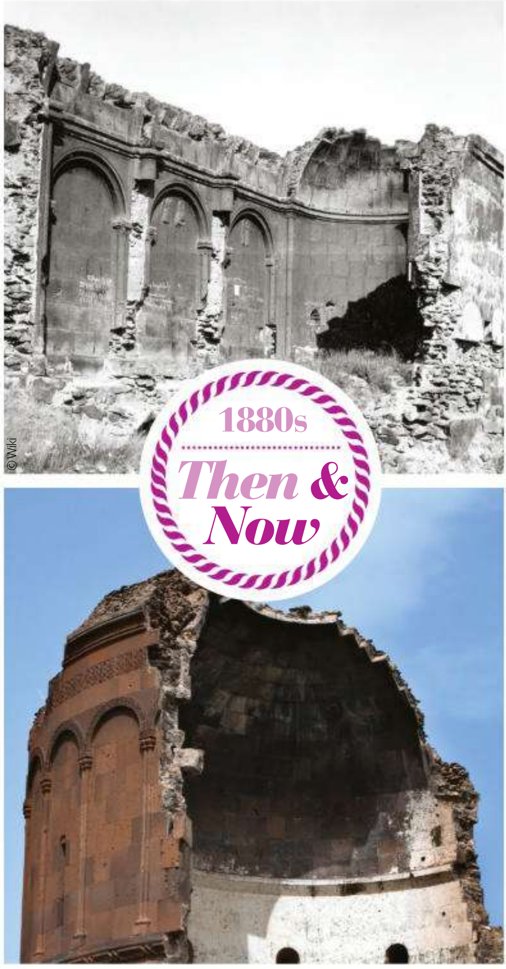
Image source: Getty

The slow desertion of Ani grew faster as the Silk Road fell out of use, and by the time the city became part of the Ottoman empire in 1579, it was nothing but a humble town. For those few who remained, life had become perilous thanks to the spread of warring Kurdish tribes who threatened the region. The last inhabitants of Ani were the monks of Kizkale, who finally departed in 1735.

For decades Ani fell silent, its once-celebrated churches sliding into disrepair. In its exposed position, the elements wreaked havoc on the city. Forgotten and isolated, it crumbled away, as around its historic walls, the Kurds fought on. That changed in 1878 when the Kars region of the Ottoman Empire, in which Ani was situated, was absorbed into the Russian Empire, and Armenians could once again venture into the ruined city. What they knew of Ani they had learned in history books. It was a place of legend, and now they could see it with new eyes, and its unhappy fate became a symbol of their own decimated land. Once rich and verdant, it was ruined and barren, a place where past glories had been ground into dust.

In 1892, Russian archaeologist Nikolai Marr, with the support of the St Petersburg Academy of Scientists, began to excavate the city. His team were the first to unlock the potential of the site, slowly and painstakingly unearthing and beginning to restore what remained of the city, including the faded frescoes that once decorated the churches. His efforts ended in 1917 when the Ottoman army marched across Armenia, laying waste to its population and lands. Marr tried to save as many artefacts as he could, but many were left behind to face Turkish soldiers who had been ordered to destroy every remaining stone in Ani. Thanks to their monumental size, the order was not carried out, though most of Marr's excavations were demolished. Trapped between the Soviet-occupied Armenian Republic and Turkey, Ani was caught in the literal crossfire. Nobody could enter the region and nobody, Marr included, could do anything to save the remains of the city. When the short-lived Republic of Armenia was divided between the Soviet Empire and the Republic of Turkey, Ani was at the very edge of the Turkish side of the border, its ancient walls

> **The deserted city, once known as the City of 1001 Churches, ended its occupied days as a monastery. It's now an abandoned site**



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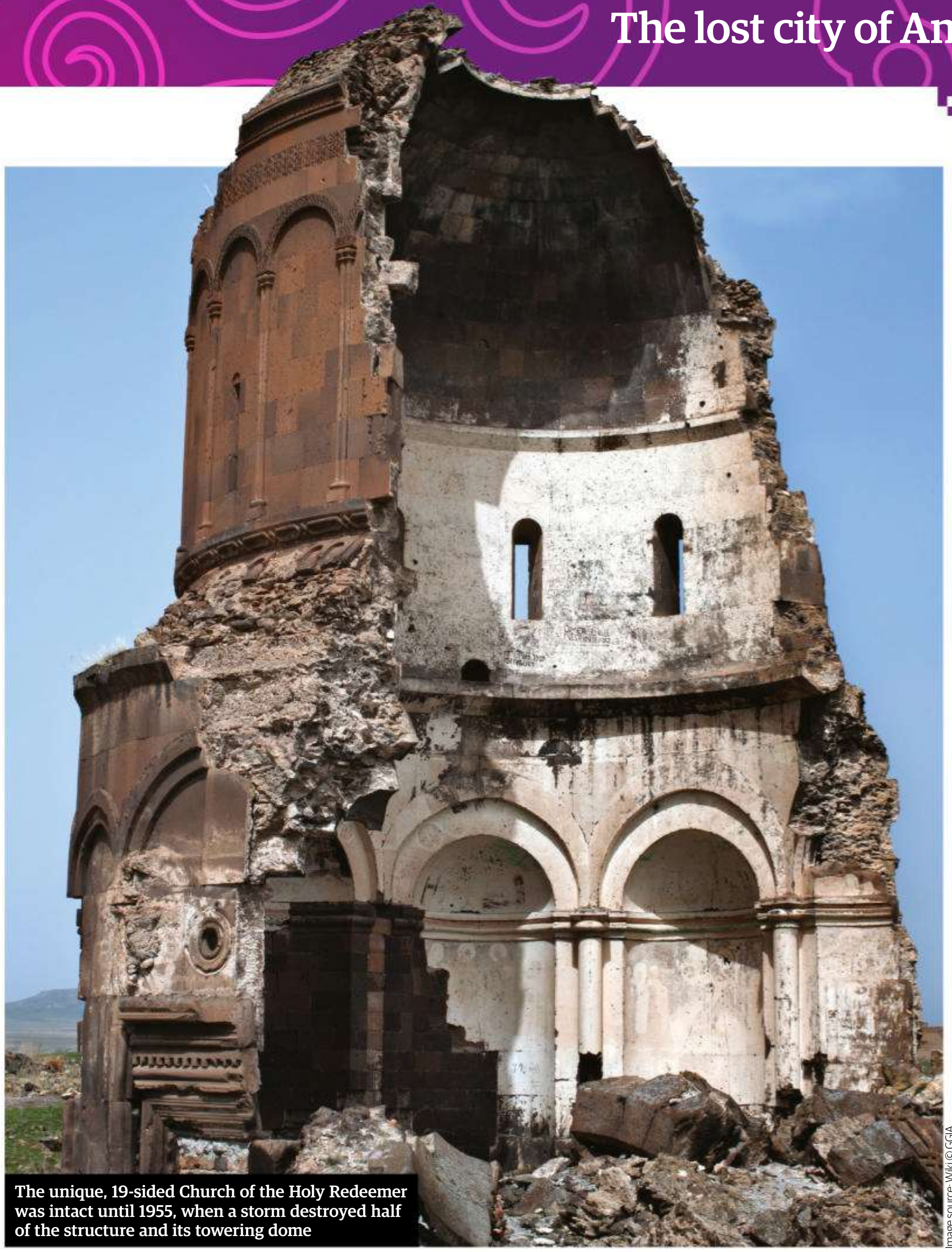


The unique, 19-sided Church of the Holy Redeemer was intact until 1955, when a storm destroyed half of the structure and its towering dome

Image source: Wiki © GGIA

> *"Ani was left to its tragic fate – hit by storms and earthquakes, the buildings that had survived through the centuries now collapsed"*

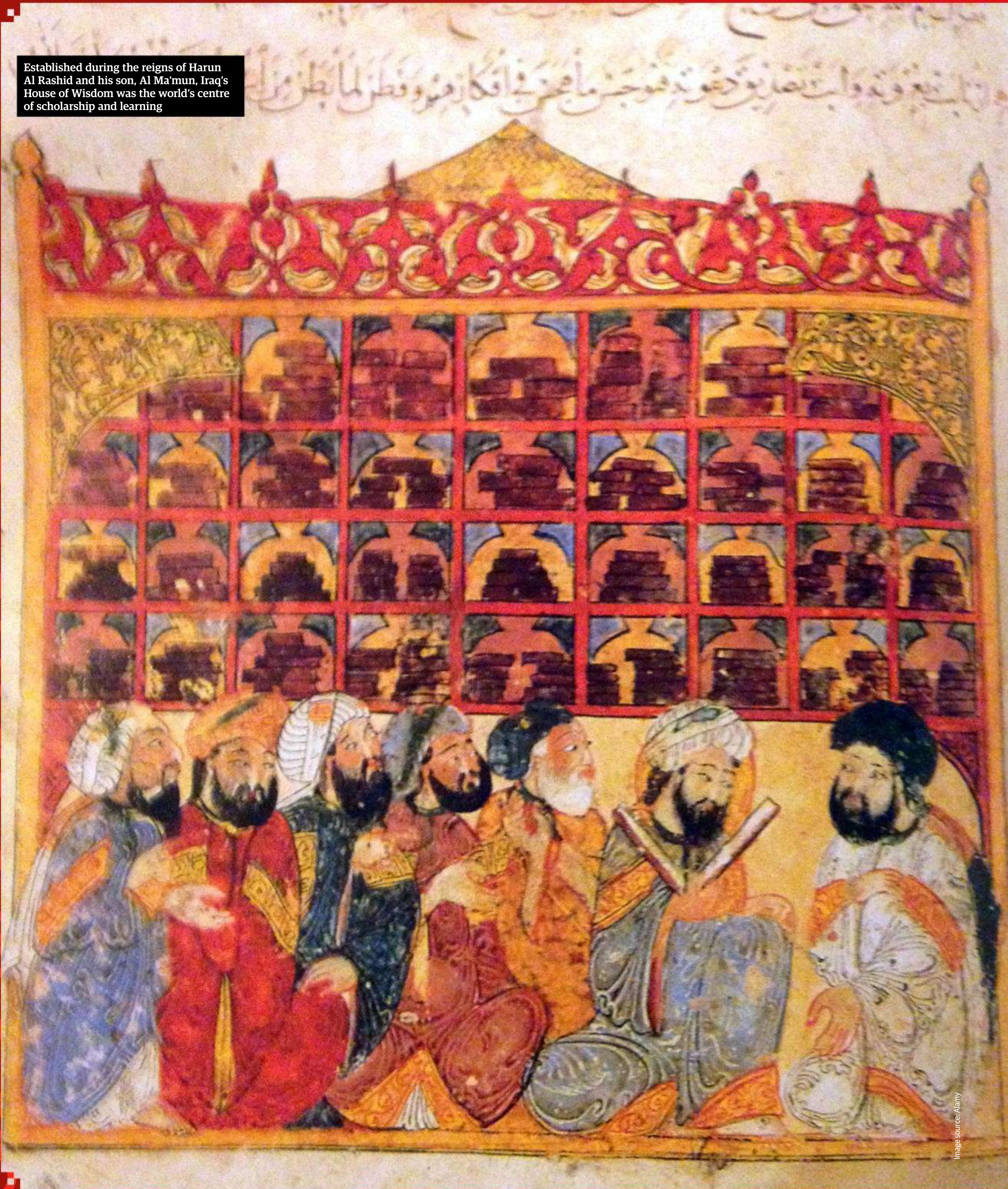
running parallel to the fences and watchtowers of the Iron Curtain.

With no wish to acknowledge this historically important Armenian site, Turkey left Ani to its tragic fate. Hit by storms and earthquakes, the buildings that had survived through the centuries now collapsed. Three churches, the Church of the Shepherd, the Georgian Church and the Church of the Child Princes, were destroyed by earthquakes in the 1960s, while another devastating earthquake in 1988 brought down part of the city wall and much of the cathedral. If that wasn't enough, military manoeuvres in Ani – including explosive testing and target practice – caused irreparable damage to the remains, while in the decades since, trespassers have daubed graffiti on the walls. In keeping with the Turkish Empire's dismissal of the Armenian site, state-approved vandalism has been rife. Whitewash was crudely splashed onto the churches to hide Armenian inscriptions, while those that were badly damaged were not restored or preserved, but simply stripped off altogether.

It wasn't until the early 2000s that the Turkish government became more sympathetic to Ani's heritage. The Ministry of Culture stopped looting and even attempted to restore some parts of the city. Unfortunately, in many cases, their good intentions caused further damage, as ruined walls were rebuilt with modern stones that matched in neither colour nor style. They also put a halt on blasting at a nearby quarry that was shaking the foundations of the city in an effort to slow the already advanced deterioration.

Thankfully, the future for Ani looks a little more positive than its past. Recognised by the Turkish government as a site of great historical importance, it has been named by the Global Heritage Fund as one of 12 sites at the most risk of irreparable destruction. It was added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2016, which hopefully means that Ani will now receive the care and attention that it needs, if not to restore it to its former glories then to preserve and excavate its remains for the generations yet to come.

Image source: Wiki



Established during the reigns of Harun Al Rashid and his son, Al Ma'mun, Iraq's House of Wisdom was the world's centre of scholarship and learning

Image source: Alamy

# The City of Peace

## *Perfectly situated between East and West, Baghdad became one of the Silk Road's leading centres of trade, science and cultural exchange*

Written by Hareth Al Bustani

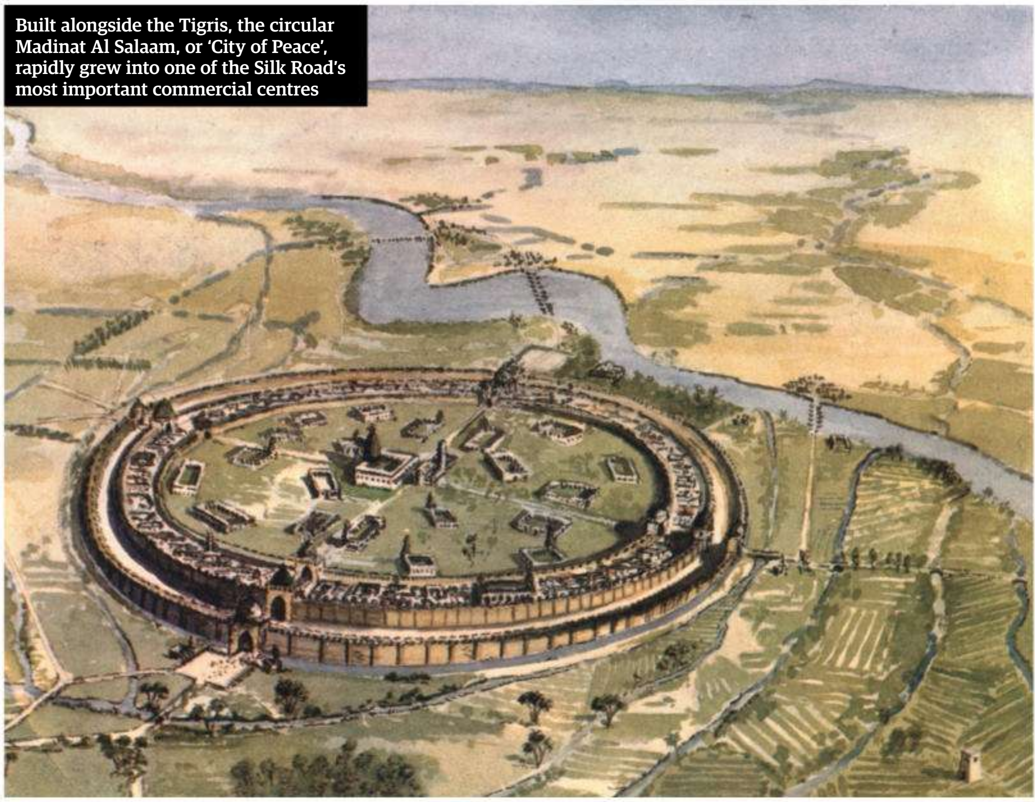
**By 750CE, the Umayyad dynasty had expanded the Muslim Caliphate to its greatest limits – ruling over a realm twice the size of the Roman Empire at its peak, stretching from Spain to China. However, that year, the Umayyads were overthrown and slaughtered by the Abbasid dynasty, who, rather than ruling from Damascus, decided to establish their very own capital. In 762, the Abbasid caliph picked a plot near the old Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon, for a remarkably ambitious new city, a beating heart for the Islamic Golden Age to come.**

Named Madinat Al Salaam, or 'The City of Peace', it was a perfectly circular metropolis, overlooking the Tigris river. Four gates were set within its mighty walls, like spokes on a wheel; the southeastern Basra Gate opened up to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, the southwestern Kufah Gate to Medina and Mecca, the northwestern Damascus Gate to Syria and the Mediterranean and the northeastern Khurasan Gate to Persia, Central Asia and beyond. Later dubbed 'Baghdad', the city was perfectly situated at a crucial intersection of the Silk Road – weaving together a tapestry of interlocking routes towards East Asia, Anatolia, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. Meanwhile, sat along the Tigris, it also occupied prime real estate on the Maritime Silk Road, soon becoming one of the world's busiest trade hubs.

Merchants would travel from as far afield as East Africa, India, Anatolia, Tibet, Khazar, Daylam and China, hauling their wares to Baghdad, where they were greeted by a sprawling market. Meanwhile, Baghdad developed a spirit of entrepreneurialism, and soon grew into one of the foremost centres of silk and velvet manufacturing. The city's artisans crafted magnificent silk, adorned with gold threads, while velvet was embroidered with small animals and birds. Their skill was so renowned, China would send its silk to Baghdad to be prepared and exported onwards to the Arabian Peninsula, Europe, Russia, Samarkand and South East Asia. Baghdad's distinctive Attabi cloth, produced in the Al Attabia district, grew immensely popular all over the planet, and was even reproduced in Europe, called tabis by the Italians and French, and tabby by the English. From Baghdad, the famed pottery of Samarra, marked by stunning colours and a luster painting technique over a white glaze, was exported to Egypt, Syria, Iran and Spain.

These Iraqi wares were carried off across the world by Abbasid traders, who, in monsoon season, would ride the winds from East Africa to India and South East Asia. Along the way, they

> *"China would send silk to be prepared and exported to the Arabian Peninsula, Europe, Russia, Samarkand and South East Asia"*



Built alongside the Tigris, the circular Madinat Al Salaam, or 'City of Peace', rapidly grew into one of the Silk Road's most important commercial centres

Image source: Alamy

anchored and settled in various commercial ports, spanning the Malabar Coast, Ceylon, Singapore, Borneo, Java, the Sumatra Islands and Canton. They were often accompanied by Abbasid scholars, intellectuals and missionaries, whose combined efforts saw the spread of Islam down the Silk Road through cultural exchange, rather than conquest. The religion found fertile ground in India, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, and Sumatran kings themselves would later adopt the faith, as evidenced by Islamic calendar engravings on their tombstones.

Although Arabic remained the official language, early Abbasid rulers borrowed generously from the collective knowledge and heritage of their domains. They drew upon Roman, Greek, Persian, Christian and Jewish works, and expanded the Caliphate's tradition of religious tolerance into a wholehearted embrace. Under the patronage of the worldly caliph, Harun Al Rashid, and his son, Baghdad grew into the world's foremost bastion of science, philosophy and academia, with a population of one million. Driving the Islamic world to the forefront of international intellectualism, the caliphs hired Muslim, Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian scholars alike to translate works into Arabic. Building upon the long-overlooked Greek scientific and technological traditions, they amassed their knowledge at the magnificent Bayt al Hikmah, or 'House of Wisdom', library in Baghdad, which featured its own reading rooms and halls.

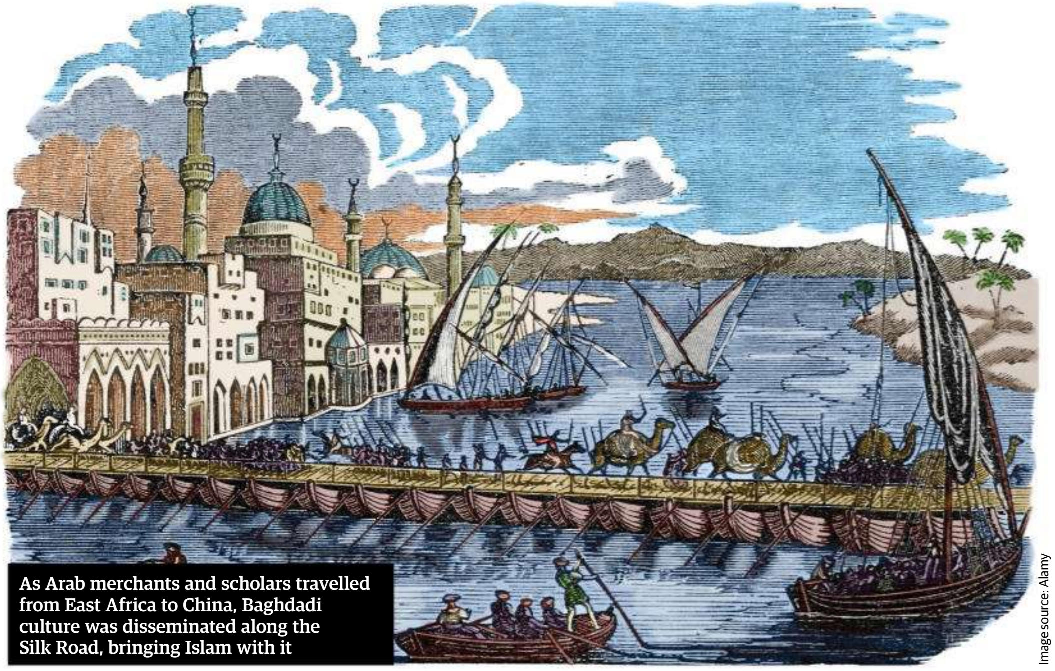

As Arab merchants and scholars travelled from East Africa to China, Baghdadi culture was disseminated along the Silk Road, bringing Islam with it

Image source: Alamy

The library's copying and binding department produced beautiful translations of existing works, which, even after the Abbasids lost North Africa to the Fatimids, were sent to the rival intellectual centres of Tunisia's own House of Wisdom and Cairo's Dar Al Hikmah. Remarkably, the Caliph successfully petitioned the Byzantine emperor, to obtain several old scientific manuscripts from the vaults of Byzantium. As works poured in from across the world, the Abbasids' translators toiled over Greek, Syriac, Assyrian, Hebrew, Latin, Chinese and Indian texts, adopting their knowledge and sharing it with the world.

They also learned Chinese paper-making techniques, which only further helped ramp up book production; an art they transmitted

## Baghdad's medical marvels

Baghdad was home to the Islamic world's first major hospital, built under Harun Al Rashid. In ensuing centuries, 30 hospitals would sprout all across the caliphate, bringing growth and prosperity to the cities they graced. Every citizen was entitled to free healthcare, regardless of their background, and Baghdad's physicians and pharmacists had to pass a test in order to practice.

Asides from sources such as the Greco-Roman Galen, Abbasid medical scholars incorporated an understanding of pre-Islamic folk medicine and Chinese drugs, as well as several Indian medical manuscripts. Galens' theory of four humours became a cornerstone of Greco-Arab medicine, which travelled from Baghdad east along the Silk Road, where it was adopted in India and infused with Ayurvedic lore. Chinese Buddhists also embraced Muslim medical knowledge, such as treating wounds and urinalysis.

The head physician at Baghdad's main hospital, Muhammad Al Razi, wrote scores of books, including a groundbreaking study of measles and smallpox, and another on toothaches. He also compiled the corpus of Arabic medical knowledge into the *Comprehensive Book of Medicine*, which was translated into Latin in 1279. His *Book of Medicine Dedicated to Mansur* became one of the most widely read medical manuals in Europe.

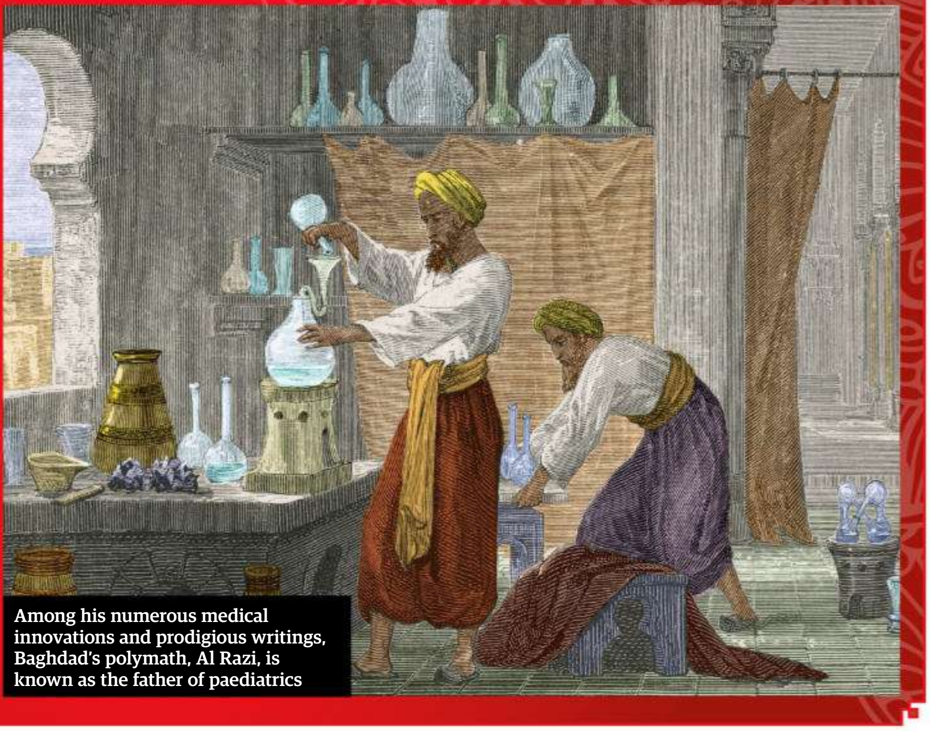

Among his numerous medical innovations and prodigious writings, Baghdad's polymath, Al Razi, is known as the father of paediatrics

Image source: Alamy

> *"Baghdad became one of the Silk Road's leading centres of medicine, bridging Roman, Byzantine, Indian and Arab practises"*

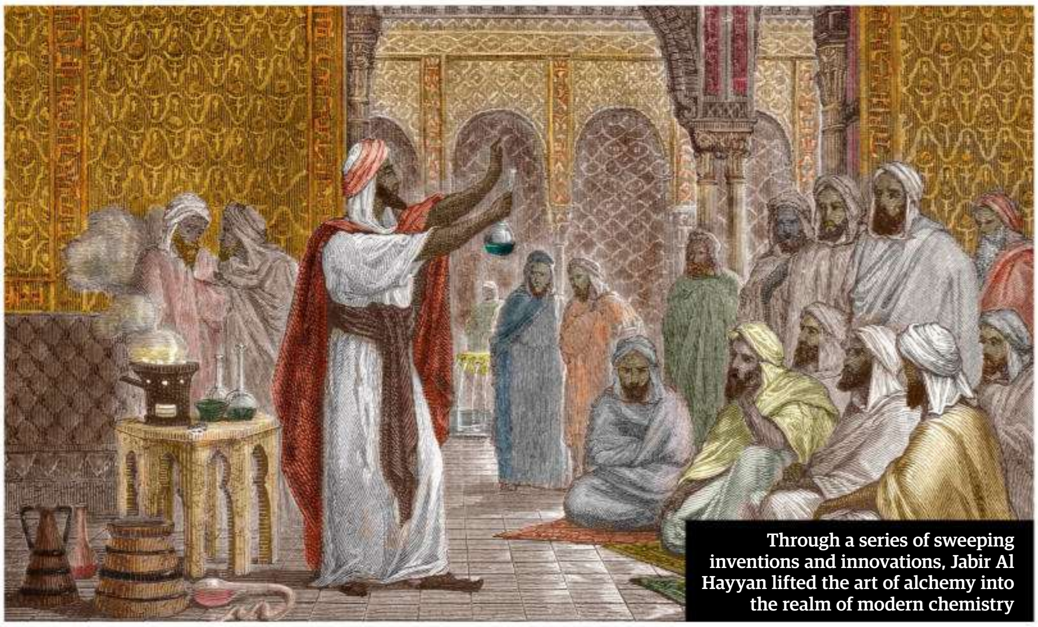

Through a series of sweeping inventions and innovations, Jabir Al Hayyan lifted the art of alchemy into the realm of modern chemistry

Image source: Getty

to Europe. Bayt Al Hikmah contained a huge number of maps, manuscripts and astronomical charts – including a magnificent map of the entire planet, produced by a team of cartographers and astronomers, commissioned by Harun Al Rashid's son, Caliph Al Ma'mun. The library inspired a renaissance, with others sprouting up not just across the Muslim world, but along the Silk Road, through Basra, Damascus, Bokhara, and Merv, towards China.

Baghdad's most renowned translator, a Christian called Hunany ibn Ishaq Al Ibadi, not only spoke Syriac, but Greek and Arabic too. Asides from composing medical texts, from the age of 17, he produced a remarkable amount of translations, including numerous versions of nearly all known Greek medical books, half the Aristotelian writings and commentaries, the Septuagint, and many mathematical works. As a result of these studies, Baghdad became one of the Silk Road's leading centres of medicine, bridging Roman, Byzantine, Indian and Arab practises. Meanwhile, the pioneer Jabir Al Hayyan transformed the art of alchemy into the science of chemistry, ushering in sweeping advancements – from the invention of the alembic, to the discovery and documentation of various scientific processes.

> **Many ancient Greek texts on medicine and mathematics were reproduced and studied in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad**

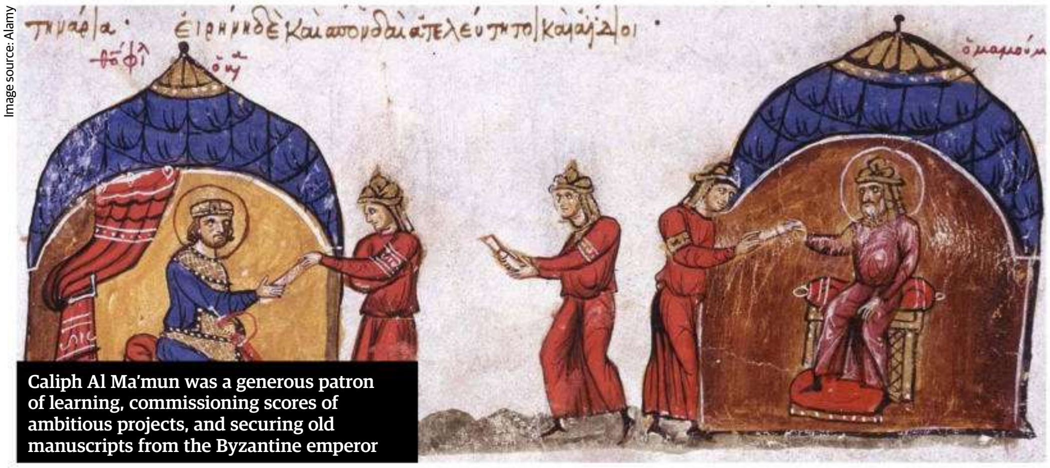
Al Haytham developed the realms of theoretical physics and optics, introducing the revolutionary concept that scientific hypotheses should be backed by empirical evidence. Al Tusi, meanwhile, wrote 160 titles, outlining the nature of the Milky Way centuries before it could be proven. Caliph Al Ma'mun built Baghdad's first observatory in the 9th century, encouraging astronomers to create tables identifying the movements of the Sun and Moon, star catalogues, and writeups about their instruments. Other observatories would later sprout up in Samarkand, modern Uzbekistan, and Maragha, Iran, where calculations varied by mere fractions of a degree.

Indian astronomers were invited to bring their planetary tables and texts for calculating eclipses to Baghdad, where they were translated into Arabic. Spectacularly, Indian stargazers embraced Islamic astronomy's rejection of the geocentric universe theory. Baghdad's astronomers supposedly discovered 1,000 uses for the archaic astrolabe device, across the fields of astronomy, horoscopes, navigation, time-keeping, prayer, surveying and more. Muslims across the world could use it to determine which direction to pray towards, and what times the five daily prayers would be at. Rather than relying on the observer's latitude, Islamic astrolabes worked anywhere on the planet. Once again, this invention would later spread to Renaissance Europe.

While it was once forbidden to depict the human form, murals of Buddhist statues and Indian narrative artwork began to adorn the city's mosques, leading to an explosion of form, techniques and figures in Islamic art. Bolstered by their newfound technical knowledge, Baghdad's artisans elevated glass-blowing to great new heights, mixing silica, soda ash and lime together and heating them to 1,371°C, before eventually blowing it into shape. Baghdadi glass, the finest in the world, travelled along the Silk Route towards China, cherished as precious wares. Asides from Chinese weaving techniques, Muslim craftsmen began to mimic the Tang dynasty's ceramic styles; helping the style to outlive the dynasty itself.

Bolstered by a spirit of tolerance and intellectualism, Baghdad remained the engine room of the Silk Road's cultural exchange for centuries – even as dwindling Abbasid power led scholars to rival alternatives. However, Baghdad's coveted seat on the Silk Road, and the Islamic Golden Age, drew to a brutal close when the Mongols sacked the city in 1258. Aside from looting and burning the city to the ground, they destroyed the House of Wisdom – the Tigris supposedly running black with the ink from countless books, and red with blood. Regardless, the legacy of the Silk Road's cultural and intellectual melting pot would live on, in Toledo's School of Translators, and Europe's Renaissance.

Image source: Alamy


Caliph Al Ma'mun was a generous patron of learning, commissioning scores of ambitious projects, and securing old manuscripts from the Byzantine emperor

# The Mongols' vast empire

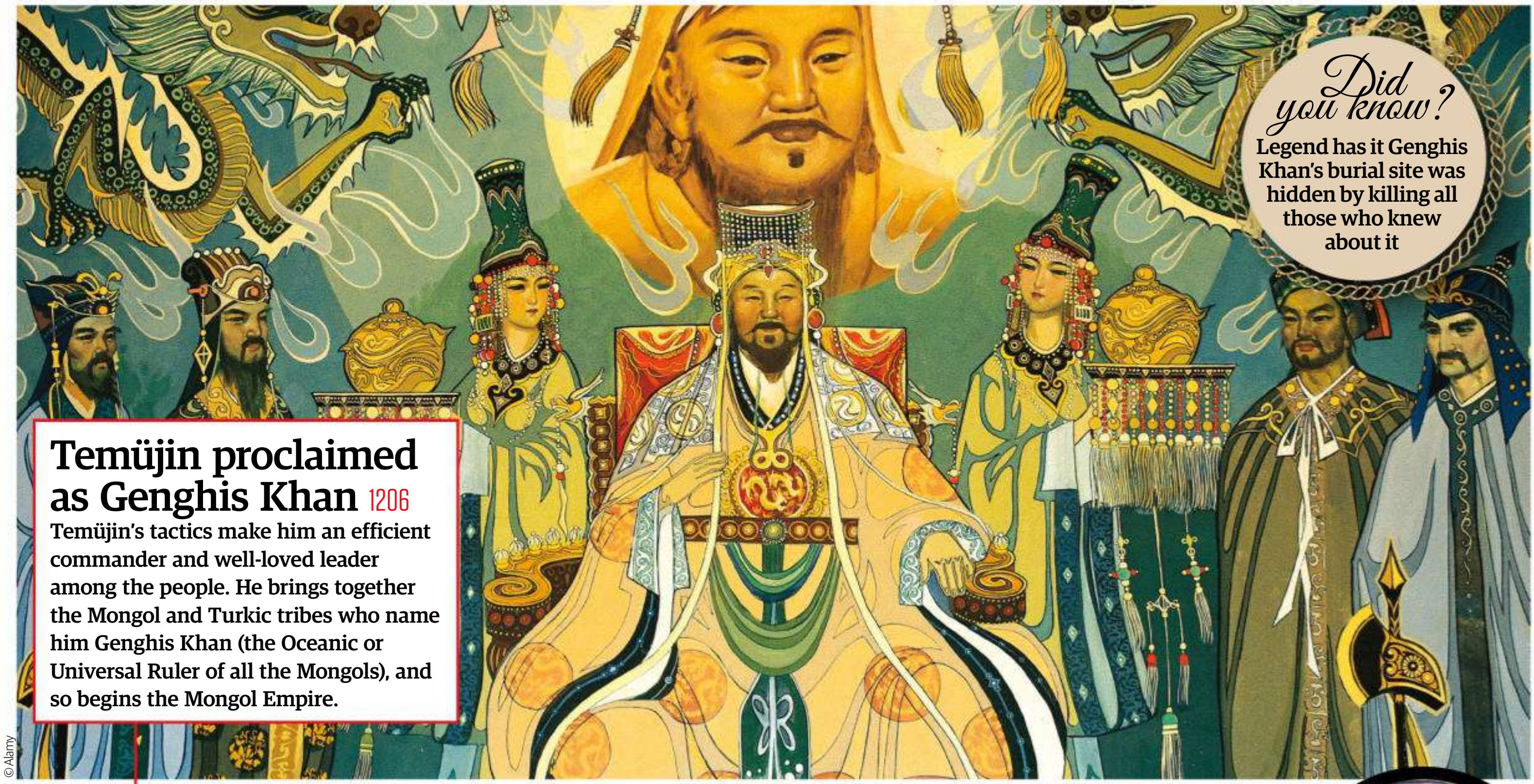

© Alamy

Image source: Alamy

## Temüjin proclaimed as Genghis Khan 1206

Temüjin's tactics make him an efficient commander and well-loved leader among the people. He brings together the Mongol and Turkic tribes who name him Genghis Khan (the Oceanic or Universal Ruler of all the Mongols), and so begins the Mongol Empire.

**Did you know?**

Legend has it Genghis Khan's burial site was hidden by killing all those who knew about it

1178 1209 1236

### TEMÜJIN BEGINS UNITING MONGOL TRIBES 1178

Between 1178-1206 Genghis Khan, born Temüjin, creates allies and unites the various Mongol tribes.

### UYGHUR TURKS JOIN MONGOL EMPIRE 1209

The Uyghur Turks peacefully submit to Genghis Khan. Many of them became administrators of the new and growing empire.

### ZHONGDU CAPTURED 1215

The Mongol army finally conquers the Jin dynasty's capital city, Zhongdu (modern day Beijing), thereby expanding the Mongol Empire into northern China.

### KHWAREZMID EMPIRE DESTROYED 1221

After the sultan killed the Mongol envoys, Genghis ends the Khwarezmid Empire (modern day Iran), a campaign that opens up the route into the Middle East.

## Genghis dies

1227

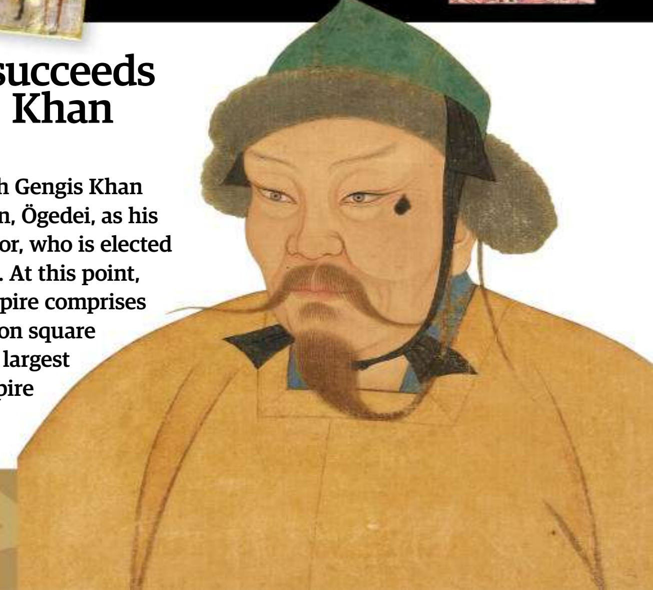
The man who almost single handedly created the Mongol Empire dies at the ripe old age of 65. As per his tribe's tradition, his grave was unmarked and remains lie unknown to this day, though he is likely buried in Khentii Aimag, his birthplace.

Image source: Alamy

## Ögedei succeeds Genghis Khan

1229

Before his death Gengis Khan appoints his son, Ögedei, as his chosen successor, who is elected the Great Khan. At this point, the Mongol Empire comprises almost 24 million square kilometres, the largest contiguous empire in history.



### INVASION OF SOUTHERN CHINA BEGINS 1236

Ögedei continues his father's conquest into China, invading the Song dynasty in southern China. Korea is also invaded.

### EMPIRE EXTENDS INTO EASTERN EUROPE 1237

Between 1237-1242 the Mongols invade Eastern Europe, conquering Western Russia, Armenia, Poland, Croatia, Georgia, Hungary and Bulgaria.

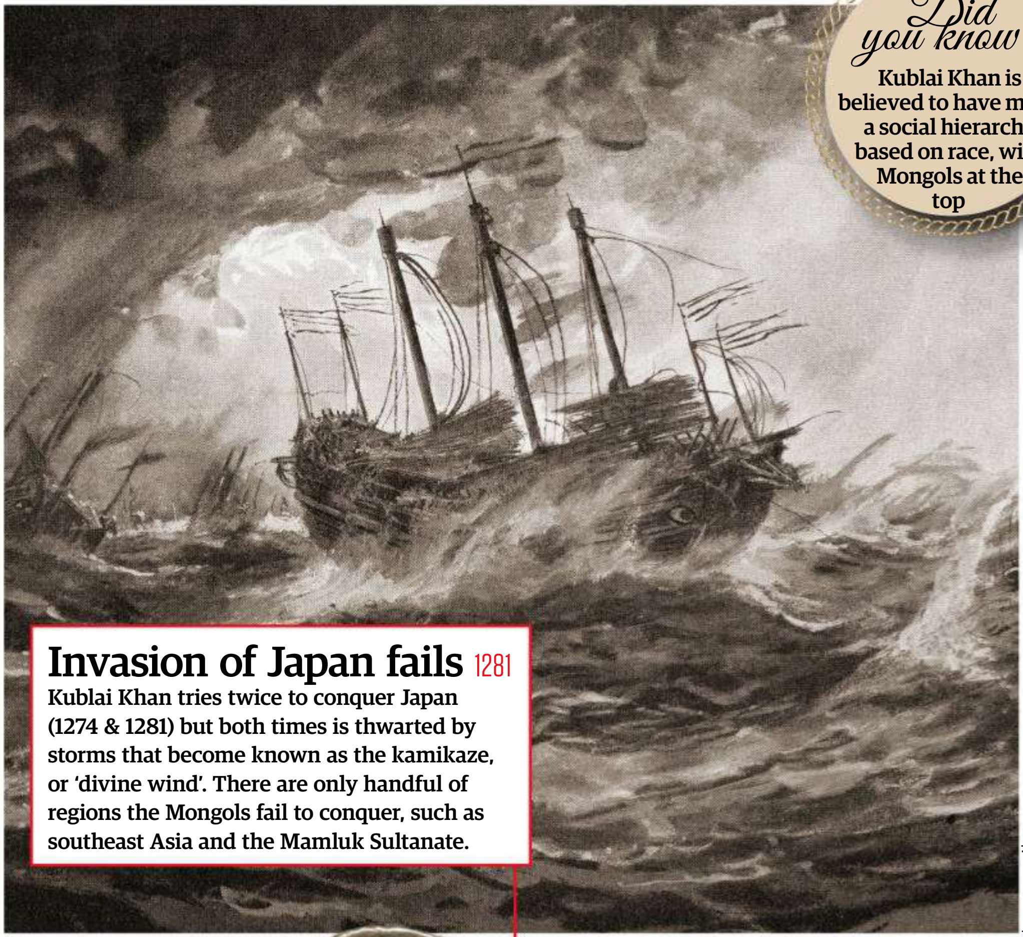


Image source: Alamy

## Invasion of Japan fails 1281

Kublai Khan tries twice to conquer Japan (1274 & 1281) but both times is thwarted by storms that become known as the kamikaze, or 'divine wind'. There are only handful of regions the Mongols fail to conquer, such as southeast Asia and the Mamluk Sultanate.

*Did you know?*

Kublai Khan is believed to have made a social hierarchy based on race, with Mongols at the top

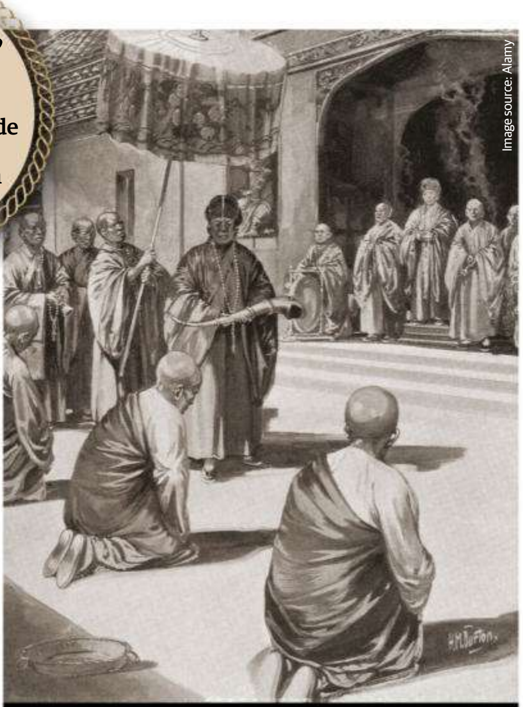


Image source: Alamy

## Ming dynasty ends Mongol Empire 1368

Zhu Chongba, a former monk born into poverty, is a militarily gifted and patient individual. His talents drives the Mongols out of Beijing, thus ending a century of Mongol rule in China and in the process establishing the Ming dynasty.

### DEATH OF ÖGEDEI 1242

Whilst on a hunting trip Ögedei dies. His wife, Töregene, becomes regent. Töregene has her eldest son, Güyük, elected as Great Khan in 1246.

### MAMLUKS DEFEAT THE MONGOLS (AGAIN) 1303

Once again the Mamluks defeat the Mongol forces at the Battle of Marj al-Saffar. As a result the Mongols leave Syria.

### IL-KHANID DISSOLVES 1335

Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan fails to appoint a successor and so upon his death, Il-Khanid dissolves into various territories ruled over by several princes.

1260

1274

1303

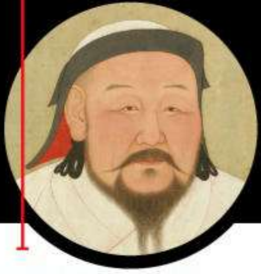
1335

### EGYPTIAN MAMLUKS DEFEAT THE MONGOLS 1260

Achieving the seemingly impossible, the Egyptian Mamluks defeat the feared Mongol forces in the battles of Ain Jalut and Homs.

### CHINA CONQUERED BY KUBLAI KHAN 1274

After first being invaded in 1236, the Song dynasty finally falls to the Mongols, who now control all of China, forming the Yuan dynasty.



### GOLDEN HORDE TURNS TO ISLAM 1315

Özbeg Khan adopts Islam as the state religion and encourages the Islamisation of the Horde. Modern day Uzbekistan is named after him.

## Abbasid Caliphate toppled 1258

Baghdad, the city of the Abbasid Caliphate, which gave rise to the Islamic Golden Age, is destroyed in a ten-day siege that shocked contemporaries. It's said the rivers ran red with blood, and black with the ink of Bagdad's libraries.

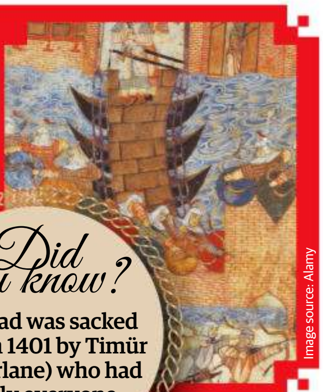
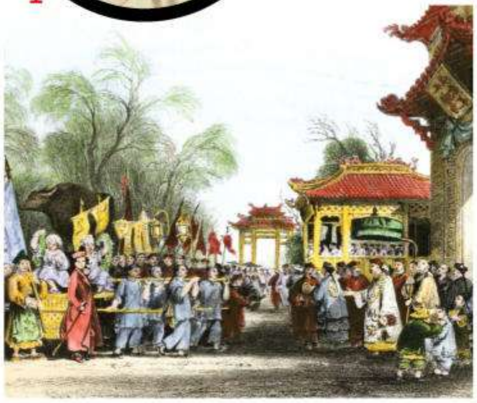


Image source: Alamy

*Did you know?*

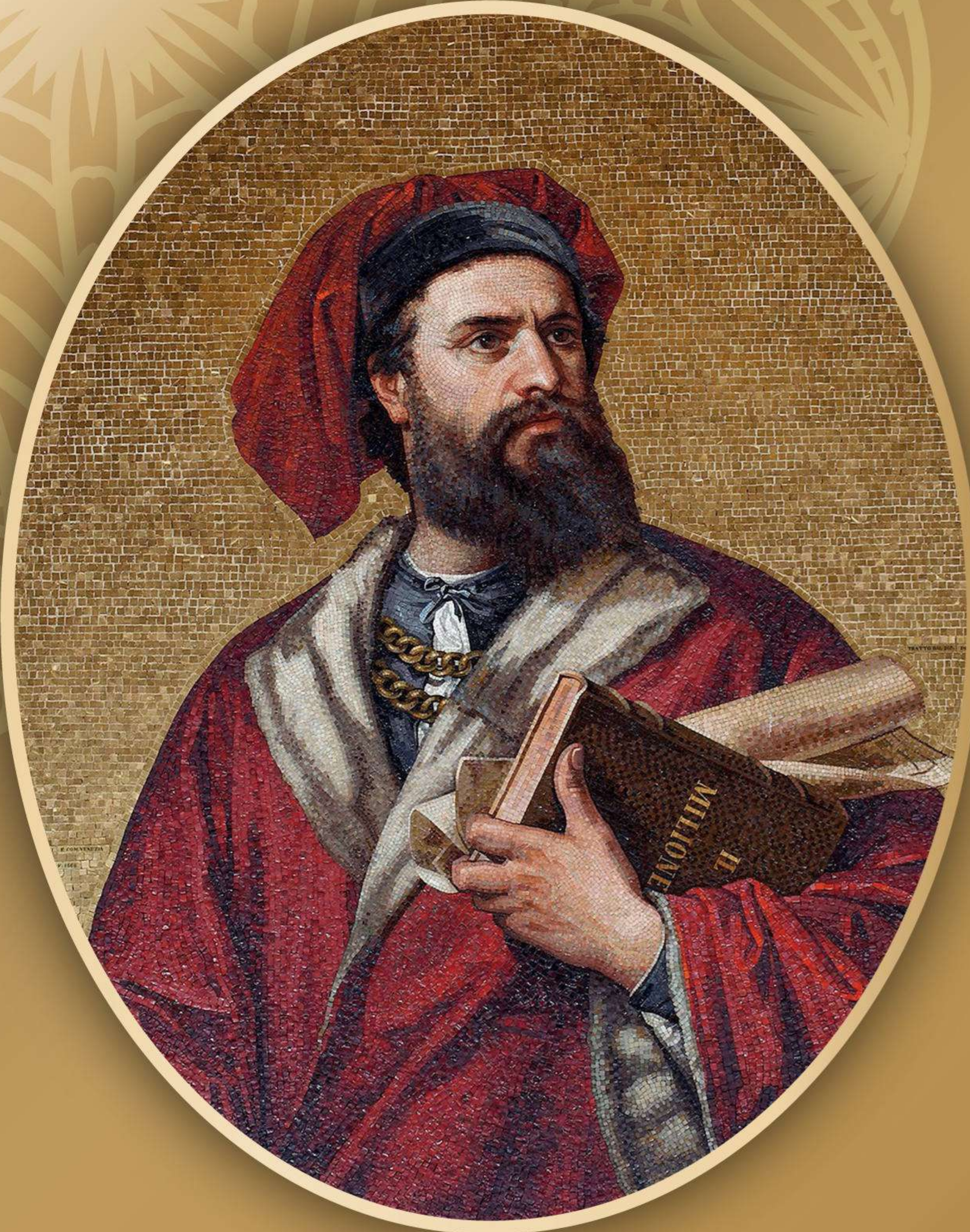
Baghdad was sacked again in 1401 by Timür (Tamerlane) who had nearly everyone killed



## Mongol Empire split into four Khanates 1294

Upon the death of Kublai, the process of disintegration, which was already well underway by this point, becomes official and the vast empire officially splits into four khanates: the Golden Horde (Russia), Chagatai Khanate (central Asia), Il-Khanid (Persia), and the Yuan Dynasty (China).

Image source: Alamy


IL MILIONE

# Marco Polo

## Journey to the court of Kublai Khan

*Travelling to locations so exotic many would not believe his tales, Marco Polo lived an extraordinary life filled with wonderment and awe*

Written by John Man

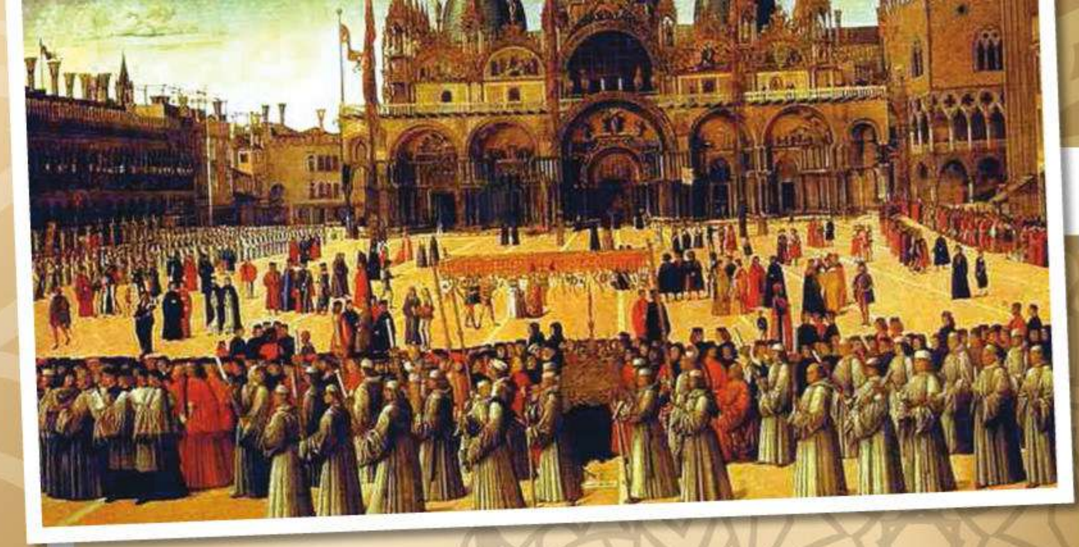
**Marco Polo's life sounds like a fairy story. An ordinary boy from Venice is taken by his father and uncle across Asia and meets the world's most powerful ruler, who employs him for 17 years, after which he returns home and records his journey in the most famous travel book of all time.**

It is an exceptional story, and true (mostly). Even more remarkable – it came about by a succession of pure chances.

In 1253, a year before Marco's birth, his father Niccolò and uncle Matteo left Venice for Constantinople, the capital of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. It had been made a Christian city by the Emperor Constantine, and was now the seat of Orthodox Christianity, as opposed to Rome, the seat of the Catholic west. But Constantinople was in decline, its economy dominated by foreign traders, notably Venetians. Bringing a ship-load of wares, Niccolò and Matteo set about exchanging their goods for jewels. After six years of profitable trade – and probably unaware of Marco's birth – they looked towards Crimea, where they could use their jewels to buy Russian wheat, wax, salted fish and Baltic amber, all much in demand in Europe.

Here fate played a role, several times over. They found that the two Venetian trading bases, Soldaia (today's Sudak) and Caffa (Feodosiya), were just inside the newly established Mongol Empire. Crimea, taken by the Mongols in 1238, was part of the so-called Golden Horde, the western section of an empire that stretched from Russia to China. To escape rivals they headed on east 1,000 kilometres to the local capital, Sarai, a city of tents and wagons on the Volga. After another successful year, they were about to set off home when they learned that Venice's rival city-state, Genoa, had driven the Venetians out of Constantinople. There was only one route possible: eastwards again to Bukhara, then a long return via Afghanistan. But once again fate intervened. A civil war between Mongol sub-states penned them in Bukhara for three years. At that point an envoy from Persia's Mongol ruler met them, and was astonished to find two 'Latins' who by now spoke good Mongol. He told them to go on eastwards, all the way to China, where his lord and master, Genghis's grandson Kublai, would give them a good welcome. "Sirs," he said, in Marco's account, "You will have great profit from it, and great honour." They would not be the first Europeans to be guided across Asia along the Mongol pony-express routes, but their two predecessors, both priests, had gone to Mongolia, not China.

The Polos arrived in Kublai's capital, Xanadu, and were well received. As luck would have it, Kublai was in need of a Christian presence to counterbalance the influence of local religions. So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# Marco Polo's Venice

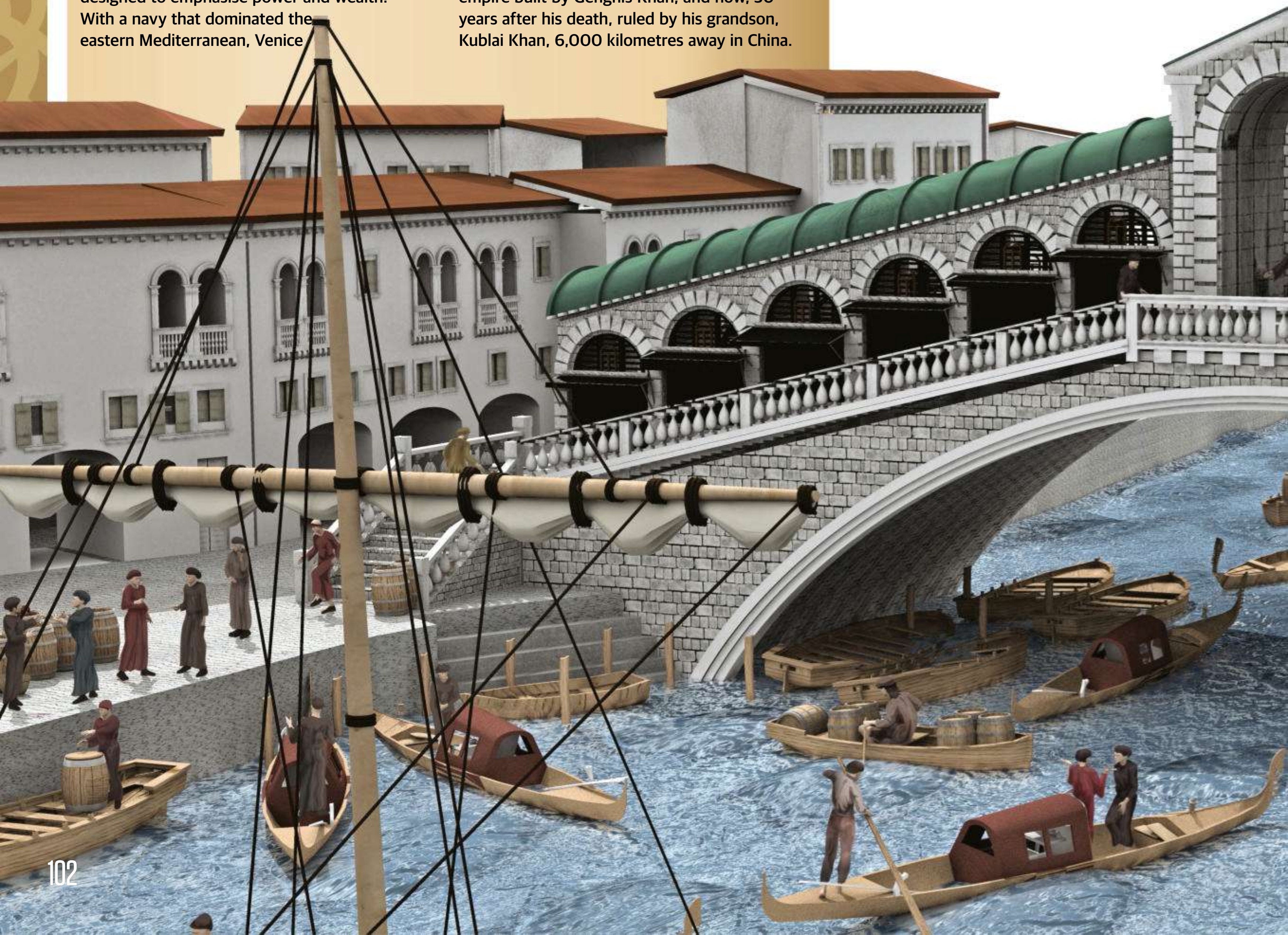
**The city where Marco Polo was raised was powerful and exotic enough to rival even the riches and wonders of Kublai Khan's vast empire**

Medieval Venice, once a village in a bog, was a place of palaces, canals and glorious churches. From his birth, probably in 1254, Marco, raised in a fine merchant's house near the Rialto Bridge, would have admired the ornate splendours of St Marks. He would have seen the city's ruler, the Doge, in state rituals designed to emphasise power and wealth. With a navy that dominated the eastern Mediterranean, Venice had built an empire, with colonies, ports and islands down the Adriatic coast. It owned Crete. Venetian enclaves drew merchants around Greece, to Constantinople and east across the Black Sea to Crimea, where two bases gave access to the Russian 'river-roads' of the Don and Volga. In 1238, Crimea had fallen to the empire built by Genghis Khan, and now, 30 years after his death, ruled by his grandson, Kublai Khan, 6,000 kilometres away in China.

he asked the two Venetians to go home and return with 100 priests and some holy oil from Jerusalem (perhaps to be used as a magic charm). He gave them a golden safe-conduct pass that allowed them to use the imperial post-roads and sent them off. After another three years of travel, the brothers reached Venice. It was 1269. They had been away 16 years, to find that Niccolò's wife had died and their son Marco was a well-educated 15-year-old ready to see the world.

Two years later, in September 1271, father and uncle set off again with Marco, via Jerusalem to pick up the holy oil. By yet another chance, a local prelate, Tedaldo Visconti, had just been made pope. Hoping that all China would fall to Christianity, he wrote a hasty letter to Kublai, urging conversion. He also gave them two – not 100 – priests, who quickly turned back.

The journey rapidly became an epic. There was war everywhere: Muslims fighting Crusaders, Mongol sub-empires fighting each other. Their golden pass would be no guarantee of safe-conduct. They avoided trouble by heading through



eastern Turkey, Iraq and Persia, down to the port of Hormuz (present day Bandar-e Abbas). The exact route is unclear, because by the time Marco came to dictate his story, his memory was vague and he himself an unreliable witness.

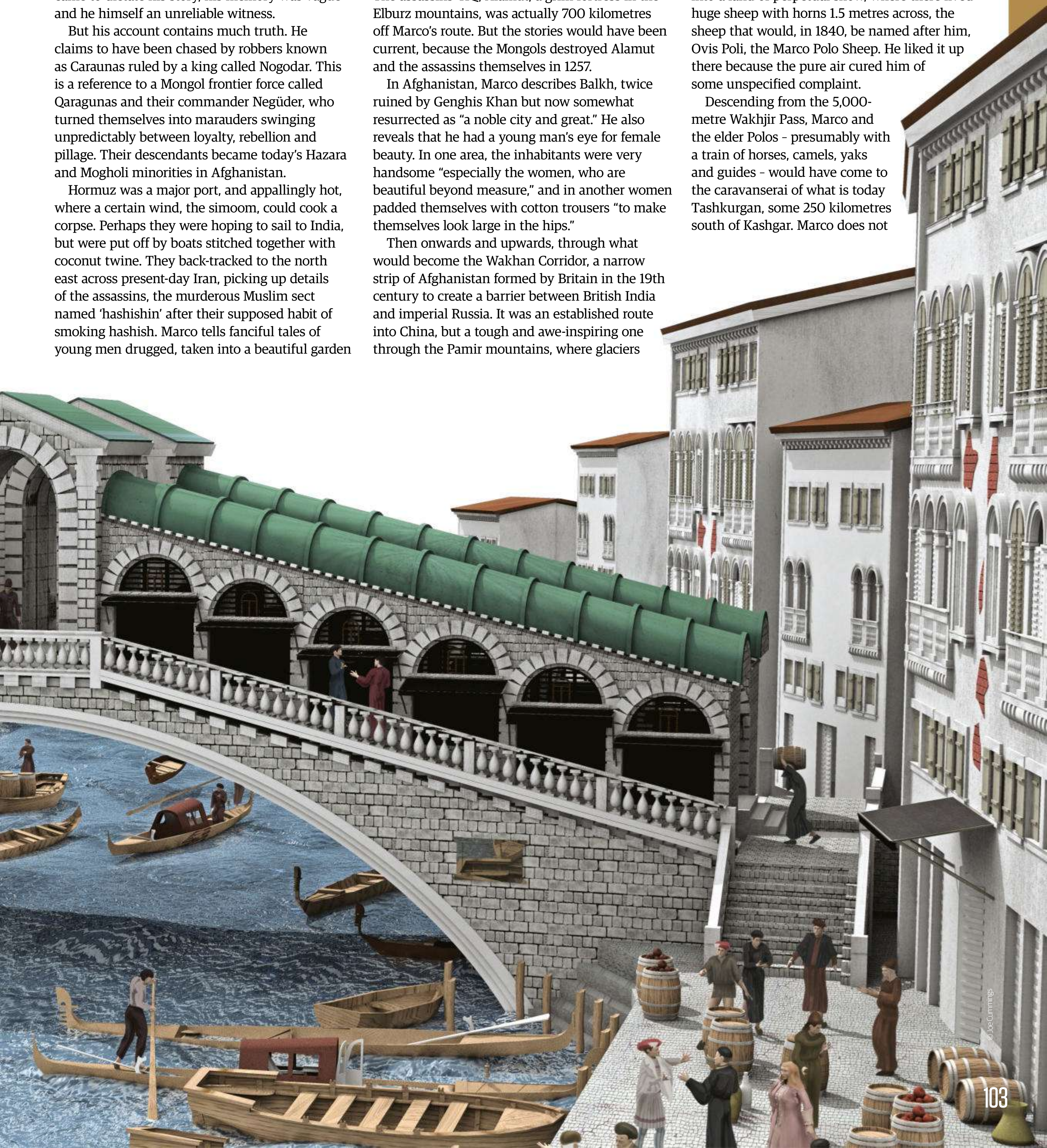
But his account contains much truth. He claims to have been chased by robbers known as Caraunas ruled by a king called Nogodar. This is a reference to a Mongol frontier force called Qaragunas and their commander Negüder, who turned themselves into marauders swinging unpredictably between loyalty, rebellion and pillage. Their descendants became today's Hazara and Mogholi minorities in Afghanistan.

Hormuz was a major port, and appallingly hot, where a certain wind, the simoom, could cook a corpse. Perhaps they were hoping to sail to India, but were put off by boats stitched together with coconut twine. They back-tracked to the north east across present-day Iran, picking up details of the assassins, the murderous Muslim sect named 'hashishin' after their supposed habit of smoking hashish. Marco tells fanciful tales of young men drugged, taken into a beautiful garden and seduced by damsels "singing and playing and making all the caresses and dalliance which they could imagine," before being sent off to kill. The assassins' HQ, Alamut, a grim fortress in the Elburz mountains, was actually 700 kilometres off Marco's route. But the stories would have been current, because the Mongols destroyed Alamut and the assassins themselves in 1257.

In Afghanistan, Marco describes Balkh, twice ruined by Genghis Khan but now somewhat resurrected as "a noble city and great." He also reveals that he had a young man's eye for female beauty. In one area, the inhabitants were very handsome "especially the women, who are beautiful beyond measure," and in another women padded themselves with cotton trousers "to make themselves look large in the hips."

Then onwards and upwards, through what would become the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of Afghanistan formed by Britain in the 19th century to create a barrier between British India and imperial Russia. It was an established route into China, but a tough and awe-inspiring one through the Pamir mountains, where glaciers grind down from 6,000-metre-high peaks and (according to Marco) the cold was so intense that no birds flew. He followed the Wakhan River up into a land of perpetual snow, where there lived huge sheep with horns 1.5 metres across, the sheep that would, in 1840, be named after him, Ovis Poli, the Marco Polo Sheep. He liked it up there because the pure air cured him of some unspecified complaint.

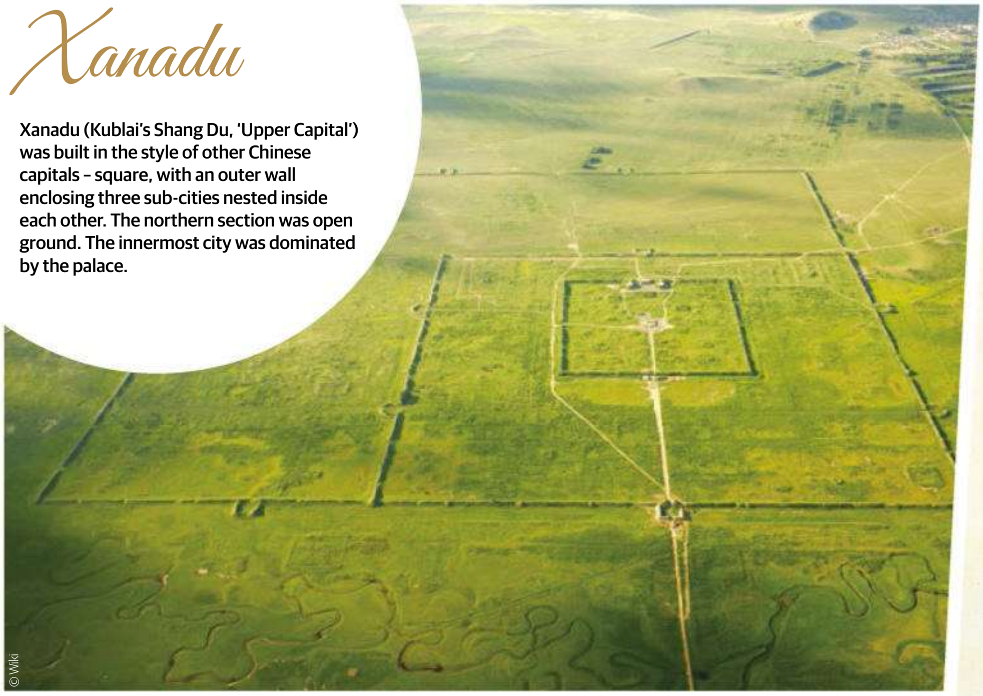
Descending from the 5,000-metre Wakhjir Pass, Marco and the elder Polos – presumably with a train of horses, camels, yaks and guides – would have come to the caravanserai of what is today Tashkurgan, some 250 kilometres south of Kashgar. Marco does not



© Joe Cummings

# Xanadu

Xanadu (Kublai's Shang Du, 'Upper Capital') was built in the style of other Chinese capitals – square, with an outer wall enclosing three sub-cities nested inside each other. The northern section was open ground. The innermost city was dominated by the palace.



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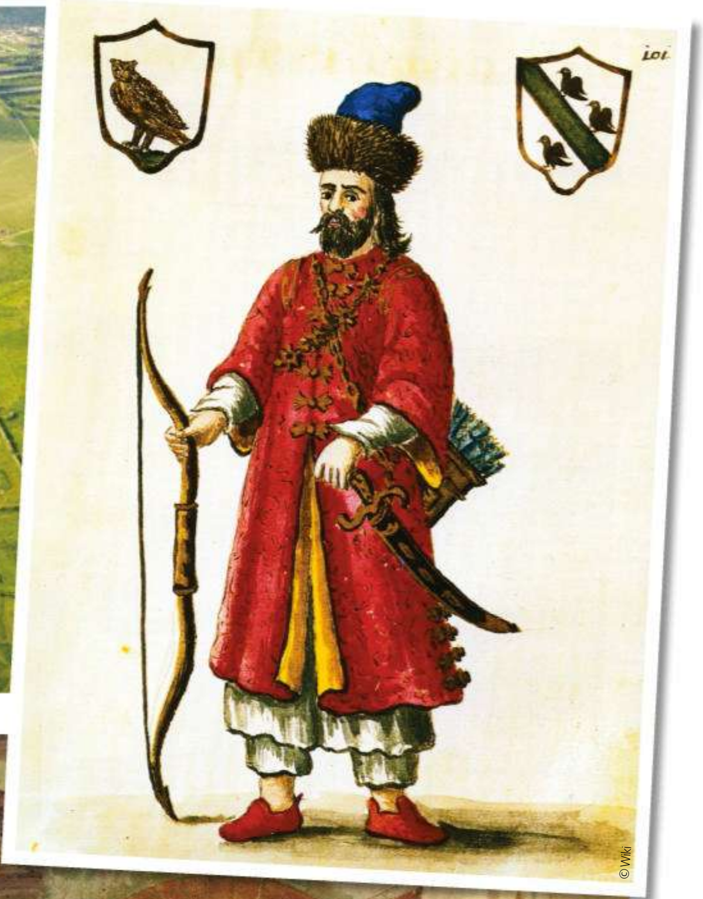

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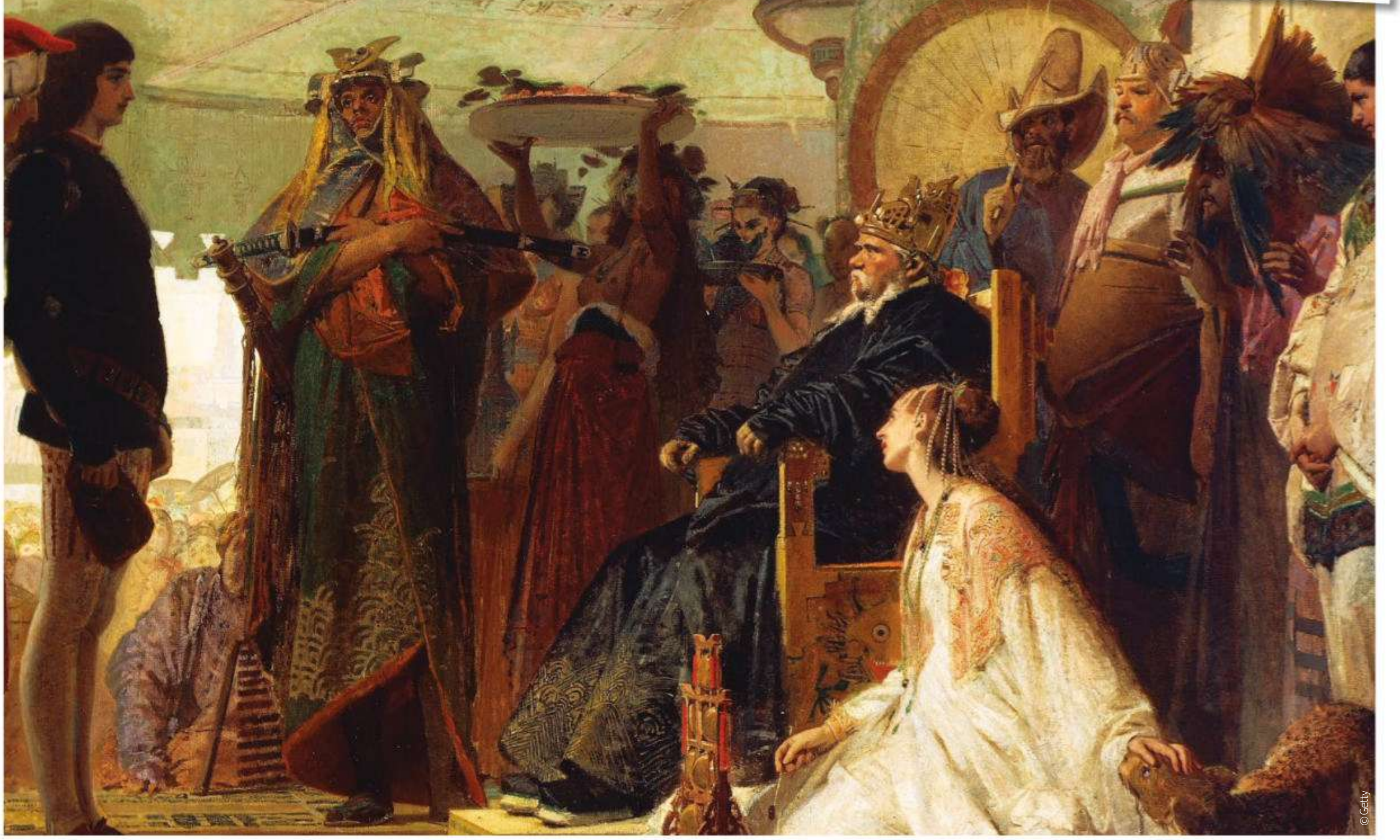
Marco was about 21 years old when he first met Kublai Khan, and he would stay with the emperor for 17 years



© Getty

mention this part of the journey, despite the narrow track, tumbling river and teetering bridges of the Gez Defile and the lone, glaciated bulk of Mustagh Ata, the Father of Ice Mountain. His memory was dominated by the gardens, vineyards and estates of Kashgar, the first major city inside today's China. Then, as now, this was Uighur territory. Marco is rude about the Uighurs, "a wretched, niggardly set of people, who eat ill and drink more ill." In fact, they were a sophisticated people with their own writing system, whose scholars were highly valued as scribes across much of Asia.

East of Kashgar lies the dead heart of Asia, the gravel wastes and shifting dunes of the Tarim Basin, with country-sized wildernesses – the deserts of the Taklamakan, Lop, Gashun Gobi and Kumtag. Nothing much grows here but scattered camel-thorns, and very little lives but sand-flies, ticks and a diffuse population of wild camels. Marco plays up the dangers, speaking of sand-spirits and demon voices calling men to their deaths. No medieval traveller would have crossed it – they didn't have to, because there was a long-established route, later to be termed the Silk Road, that led along the southern fringes, from oasis to oasis, fed by rivers running down from the Kunlun mountains. Marco mentions towns – Yarkan, Khotan, Charchan – which still exist. Others have vanished beneath the drifting sands, notably Lou Lan, whose rediscovered ruins are now off-limits because China tests its nuclear weapons nearby.

> *"Marco was as close to the emperor as any minister"*

This is China's far west, and it was Kublai's far west as well. Like a comet at the edge of the solar system, Marco was now beginning the long, slow fall towards Xanadu, the empire's Sun. But Kublai's control of the Western Regions, referred to by Marco as "Great Turkey," was tenuous. Much of it was claimed by Kublai's rebellious cousin, Kaidu, who remained a thorn in Kublai's side for 40 years.

Marco tells a good story about Kaidu: he had a daughter, the formidable Aijaruc (which he says means Bright Moon; in fact it means Moonlight). So big – "almost like a giantess" – strong and brave was she that no man could match her. Kaidu doted on her, and wanted to marry her off. But she always refused, saying she would only marry a man who could beat her in wrestling. Every challenger had to put up 100 horses. After 100 bouts, Aijaruc had 10,000 horses. Then a rich and powerful prince arrived, offering 1,000 horses. They wrestled. She won. Thereafter, Kaidu took her on campaigns, where she proved her worth dashing into the enemy to seize some man "as deftly as a hawk pounces on a bird." Is there any truth in this? A little. Mongolian women did indeed have a reputation for toughness, and Kaidu did indeed have a favourite daughter, but her name was Kutulun.

At the eastern end of the desert, Marco passed the western end of the Great Wall, built 1,000 years before to keep out nomads like the Mongols. It would not have looked great to him, because it was made of reeds and earth, and had been abandoned for half a century, with the Mongols ruling on both sides of it. If he noticed it at all, he did not think it worth a mention.

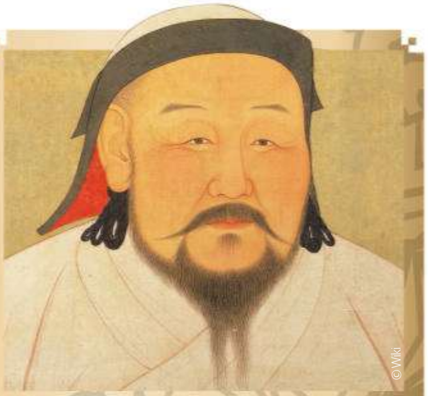
By now (probably the spring of 1275), it seems he and his entourage had been noticed. Messengers had galloped ahead with news that foreigners were coming – Mongol-speakers, bearing a golden pass, without doubt the 'Latins' who had been in Kublai's court ten years previously. Guards rode "a full 40 days" to meet them, and guide them to Xanadu, where Kublai was in residence.

At this point, perhaps because the surroundings were greener, Marco speaks of two animals. It is sometimes asked if Marco actually experienced everything he described. The answer is: almost always. These descriptions are proof. The first refers to a species of shaggy cattle, which he said with some exaggeration were "as large as elephants." This is the first western description of a yak, then unknown in Europe. The second is a deer the size of a dog, which he calls "a very pretty creature." It is a musk deer, from the neck gland of which comes the musk so desired by perfume-makers. He even guesses at its Mongolian name, gudderi – khüder in modern Mongolian – which no one could learn except by experience.

Now half way across modern China, Marco came to Yinchuan, which had been the capital of the Tangut people, a separate empire known as Western Xia, which had been destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1227. Marco's terminology is not exactly right, but almost so. He picked up the Mongol name for Yinchuan (Egrigaia in his text, Eriqaya in Mongolian), and the name of the local mountain range (Helan Shan, which he transcribed as Calachan).

On then across the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, past villages and cultivated fields, to a place of "a great many crafts such as provide for the Emperor's troops." This was Xuanhua, on the main road leading from today's Beijing to what was once the Mongolian border. Here, he would have turned right for Beijing, Kublai's new capital, or left for Xanadu, Kublai's first capital and now his summer residence. It was summer. His guides knew that their lord was in Xanadu. There was only another 250 kilometres to go.

Xanadu is a name derived from the Chinese Shang Du, 'Upper Capital,' as opposed to Beijing, which was Dadu, 'Great Capital'. We spell it that way because that was how the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge spelled it in his famous poem written on waking from a dream in 1797: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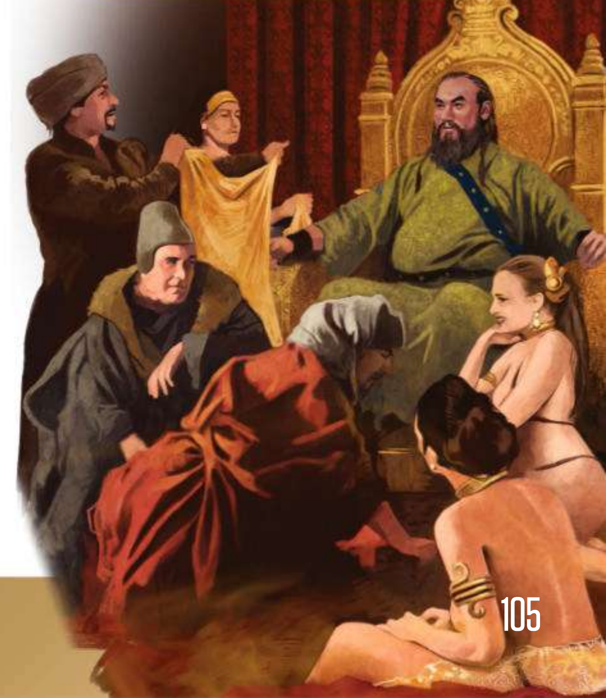
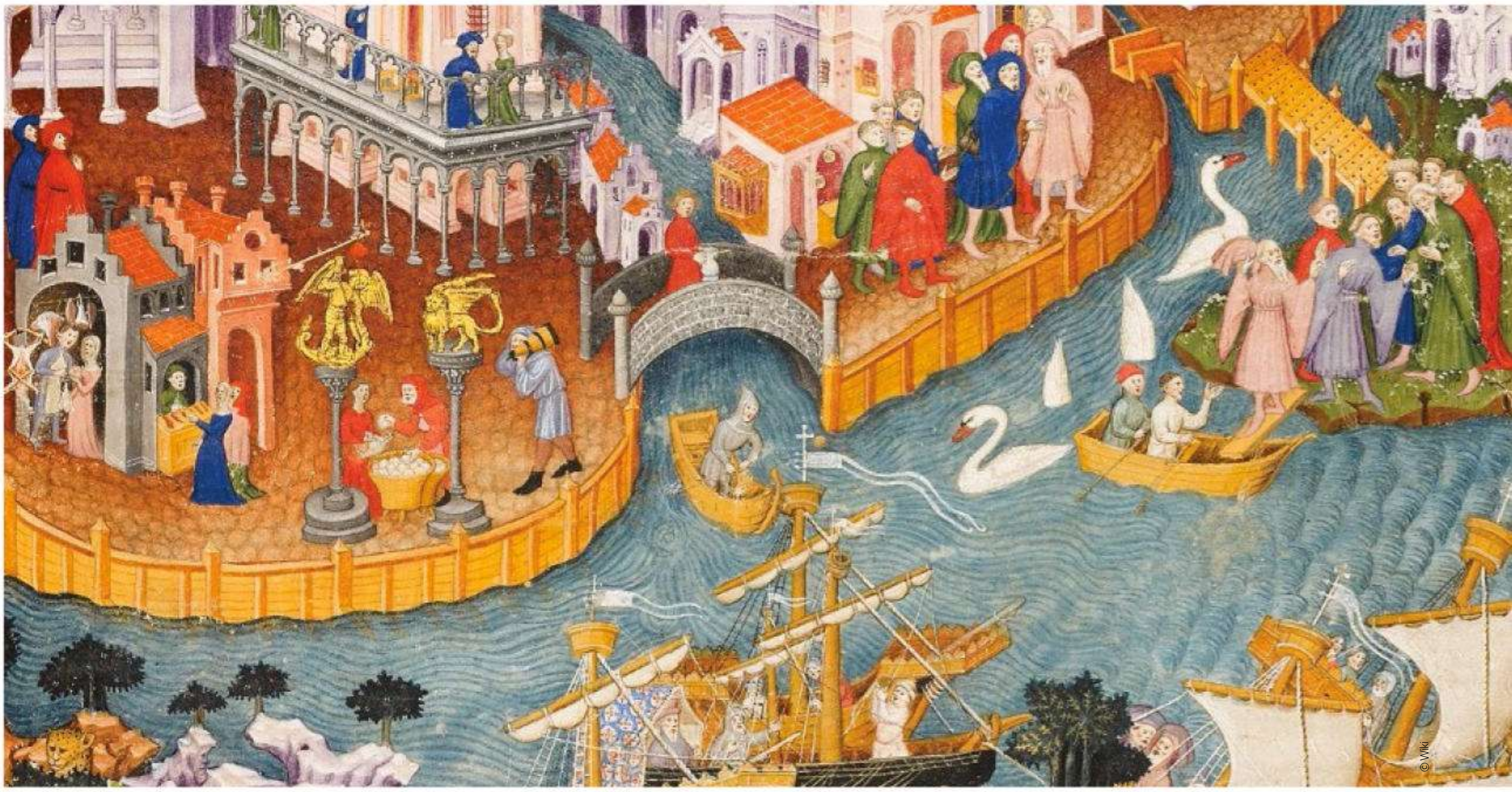
## The real 'pleasure dome'

### Kublai Khan's incredible nomadic palace

Marco described what he called a 'Cane Palace' in Xanadu, recalled in Coleridge's poem: "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/ A stately pleasure dome decree." Because the poem records a dream, the palace is easily dismissed as a legend. In fact, Marco described a real building. By 'Cane' he meant bamboo, available in semitropical Yunnan, conquered by Kublai in 1253. Cut in half lengthwise to form overlapping, 15-metre 'tiles', bamboo stems formed a domed roof.

To counteract the lift induced by high winds on the aerofoil roof, it was held down with '200 silken cords', in Marco's words. Probably used as a hunting lodge in summer, its real purpose was political – it symbolised Kublai's two cultures, Mongolian and Chinese. It combined the style of a Mongolian tent – easily dismantled for winter storage – with Chinese materials and techniques.





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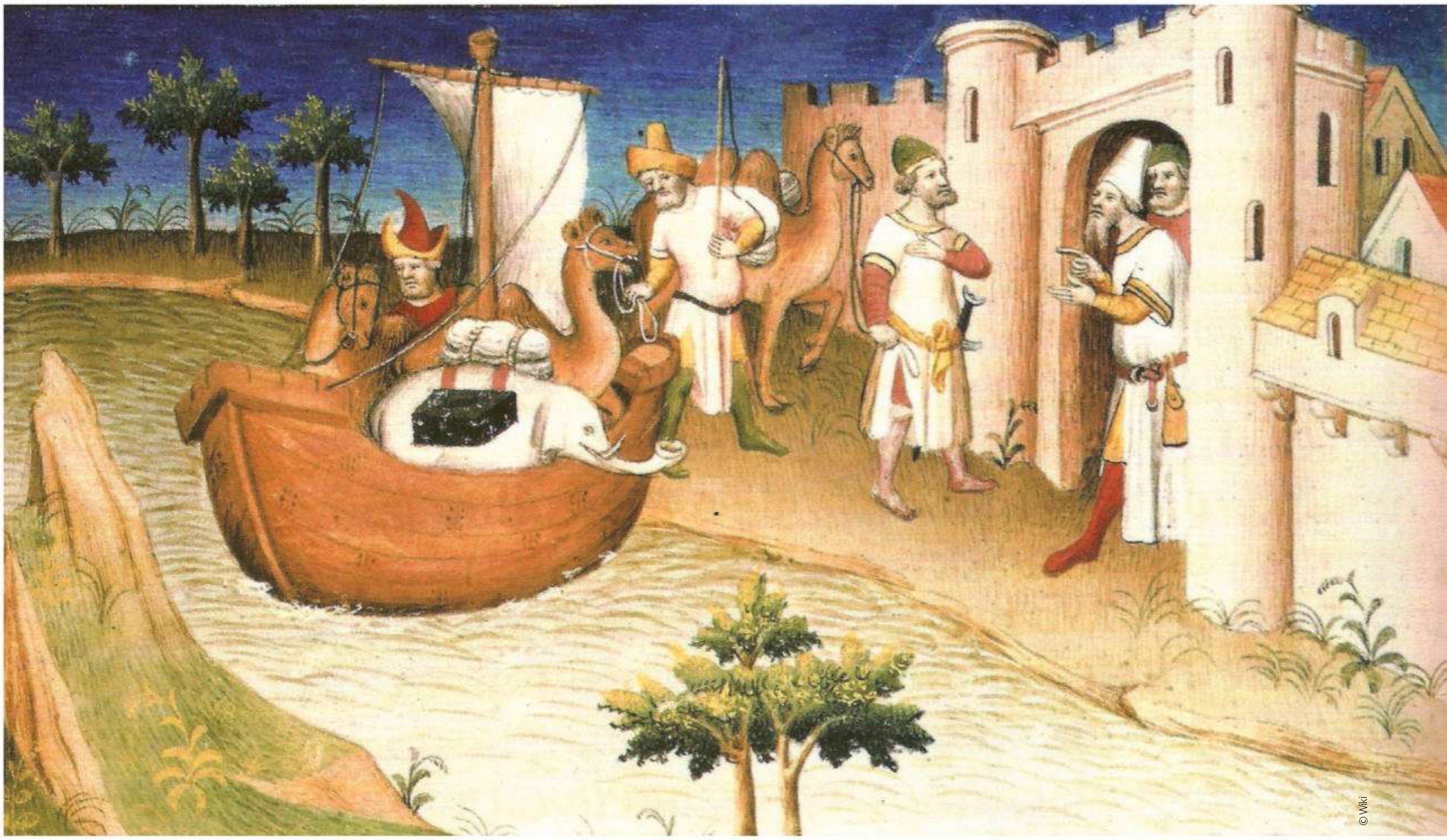

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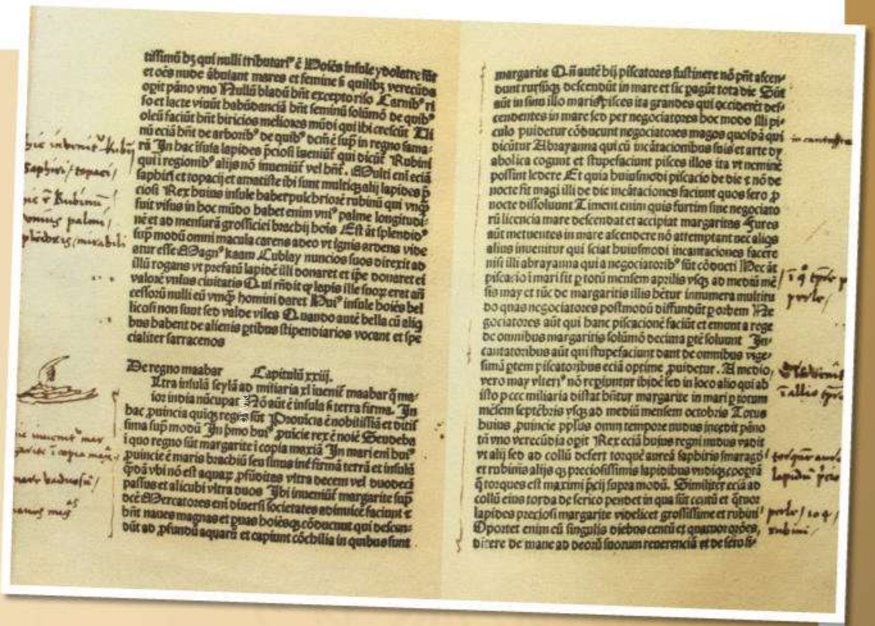
# Marco's impact

### Disbelieved for centuries, then re-evaluated



Marco's book was dictated in haste while a prisoner of war in Genoa in 1299. It is usually called *Description Of The World*, or simply *Travels*. Since the book predated printing, it was 'published' by scribes and translators. The original was lost, and the copies were corrupted by additions, deletions and errors. And since there was no other information, people came to see the *Travels* as a collection of fables.

It took almost exactly two centuries for his book to make its greatest impact. As learning took off in the 15th century, accounts by later travellers suggested that he was essentially truthful. The late-15th century was the great age of exploration as Europeans tried to reach the East, seeking trade with South East Asia and the Chinese mainland, known as Cathay (Cataia, as Marco called north China, from the Mongolian 'Khiatad').

As the Portuguese opened the sea-route round southern Africa, Christopher Columbus, inspired by both Marco and a map based on his account, suggested a quicker route westwards across the Atlantic, thus reaching China directly. But the Portuguese were committed to the African route, and rejected Columbus, who proposed the same idea to the Spanish rulers, Ferdinand and Isabella. With nothing to lose, they backed him. The result: Columbus's discovery in 1492 that the ocean did not stretch all the way to China. There was another continent in the way. Columbus thought he had arrived in China. It was, of course, America.

***In Xanadu did Kubla Khan***  
***A stately pleasure dome decree***  
***Where Alph the sacred river ran***  
***Through caverns measureless to man***  
***Down to a sunless sea.***

There was a 'pleasure dome', but no caves, or Alph, and the Pacific is almost 400 kilometres away. Xanadu was and is on the Mongolian plateau, a place of rolling grasslands and low hills. In Marco's day, this Chinese-style city had 120,000 inhabitants, approached along the so-called Royal Road, which cut through a mass of round felt tents, horses, camels and traders.

Guided through the main gate to "a very fine marble palace," the three were taken into an audience with Kublai. He was delighted to see his 'Latin' envoys back again. Marco was overwhelmed with admiration of "the most potent man that ever hath existed." They knelt, then prostrated themselves, rose, and described their journey. They presented the pope's letter and the holy oil. Then Kublai asked about Marco.

"Sire," said Niccolò, "He is my son and your liegeman," handing Marco over to Kublai's service.

"Welcome is he too," said Kublai, beginning a relationship that would last 17 years. In that time, Marco was as close to the emperor as any minister, perhaps closer, because Kublai valued him as an independent source of information, untouched by the court's many rival groups. Speaking good Mongolian, Marco went on at least five great journeys to the corners of Kublai's Chinese possessions, probably to gather information on foreigners and minorities. Almost certainly, he was a member of the emperor's keshig, his 12,000-strong personal bodyguard. Later, he wrote of what he saw for Europe's Christian readers, but did not reveal why he was sent, probably because it implied too close a relationship with a non-Christian ruler.

Between his journeys, he experienced court life in all its magnificence. He accompanied Kublai as he travelled between Xanadu and his new, main capital Beijing, a journey that took three weeks, with Kublai riding in a specially designed room strapped onto four elephants, harnessed abreast. Beijing, chosen because it was the key to the conquest and rule of all China, was built almost from scratch after the destruction caused by Kublai's grandfather, Genghis Khan: temples, gardens, lakes and a palace of varnished woodwork and glittering tiles. Uncounted halls, treasure rooms, offices and apartments surrounded an audience hall that could host 6,000 diners. In nearby parklands, deer and gazelle grazed. Court life revolved around 150 long-established rituals, controlled by four government departments and a Board of Rites. Other departments regimented 17,000 scholar-officials. The three main state occasions were the Khan's birthday at the end of September, New Year's Day and the spring hunt.

"Kublai valued him as an independent source of information"

For New Year's Day and the khan's birthday, gifts flowed from the far reaches of the empire. Horses, elephants and camels paraded, thousands dressed in white (for luck) touched their foreheads to the floor in adulation and joined a vast feast, with the emperor and his entourage on a raised platform, served by ministers with napkins stuffed in their mouths, so that "no breath or odour from their persons should taint the dish or the goblets presented to the Lord."

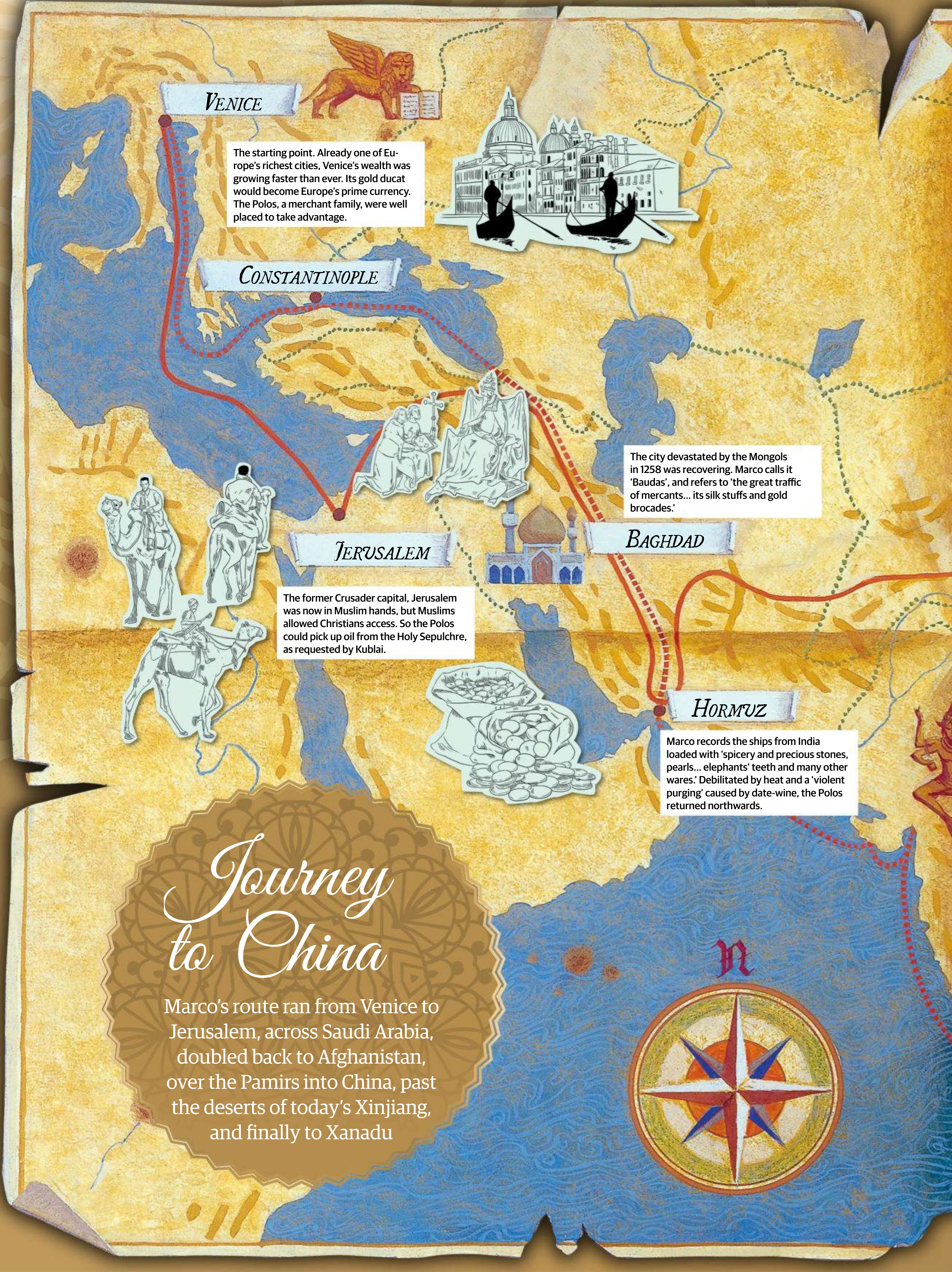
On 1 March, Kublai supervised hunting on an industrial scale. In 40 days, the hunt covered some 500 kilometres. Marco describes 14,000 huntsmen and 10,000 falconers (though the numbers are probably exaggerated) with gyrfalcons, eagles, peregrines, hawks and goshawks, backed by 2,000 mastiff-like dogs, all hunting hare, foxes, deer, boar, even wolves. At night, the emperor camped in a tent-city that surrounded his own huge tent, which was lined with ermine and sable furs and waterproofed with tiger skins. By day, the emperor was in his vast howdah on his four elephants.

Marco described the scene: "And sometimes as they may be going along, the Emperor from his chamber is holding discourse with his barons, one of the latter shall exclaim: 'Sire! Look out for cranes!' then the Emperor instantly has the top of his chamber thrown open, and having marked the cranes, he casts one of his gyrfalcons."

For Marco, this life ended in 1292. Kublai was old, obese and in poor health. Marco, his father and uncle were nervous of their future under a new ruler. Kublai unwillingly allowed them to leave by sea as companions for a princess who was to be married to one of Kublai's relatives in Persia. They arrived home in 1296, two years after Kublai's death.

# Journey to China

Marco's route ran from Venice to Jerusalem, across Saudi Arabia, doubled back to Afghanistan, over the Pamirs into China, past the deserts of today's Xinjiang, and finally to Xanadu

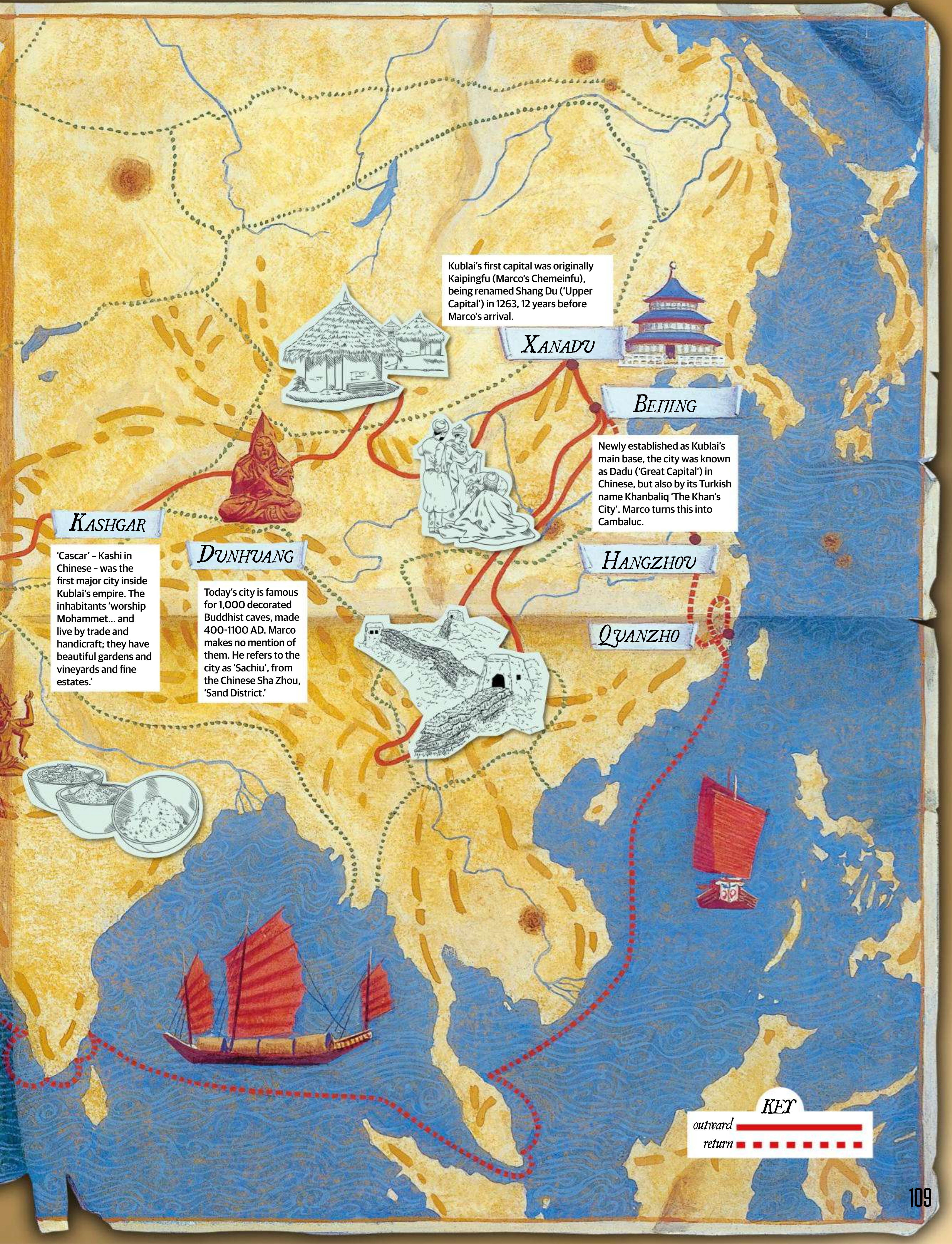


The starting point. Already one of Europe's richest cities, Venice's wealth was growing faster than ever. Its gold ducat would become Europe's prime currency. The Polos, a merchant family, were well placed to take advantage.

The former Crusader capital, Jerusalem was now in Muslim hands, but Muslims allowed Christians access. So the Polos could pick up oil from the Holy Sepulchre, as requested by Kublai.

The city devastated by the Mongols in 1258 was recovering. Marco calls it 'Baudas', and refers to 'the great traffic of mercants… its silk stuffs and gold brocades.'

Marco records the ships from India loaded with 'spicery and precious stones, pearls… elephants' teeth and many other wares.' Debilitated by heat and a 'violent purging' caused by date-wine, the Polos returned northwards.



Kublai's first capital was originally Kaipingfu (Marco's Chemeinfu), being renamed Shang Du ('Upper Capital') in 1263, 12 years before Marco's arrival.

Newly established as Kublai's main base, the city was known as Dadu ('Great Capital') in Chinese, but also by its Turkish name Khanbaliq 'The Khan's City'. Marco turns this into Cambaluc.

'Cascar' – Kashi in Chinese – was the first major city inside Kublai's empire. The inhabitants 'worship Mohammet… and live by trade and handicraft; they have beautiful gardens and vineyards and fine estates.'

Today's city is famous for 1,000 decorated Buddhist caves, made 400-1100 AD. Marco makes no mention of them. He refers to the city as 'Sachiu', from the Chinese Sha Zhou, 'Sand District.'

# Marco Polo's Silk Road

*Heading from Venice, Marco Polo travelled across a well-trodden route*

## 1 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRAQ

### BAGHDAD

Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, led the Mongol's brutal siege of Baghdad in 1258, massacring and raping its people while destroying and looting some of its most precious buildings including mosques, palaces, hospitals and the Grand Library.

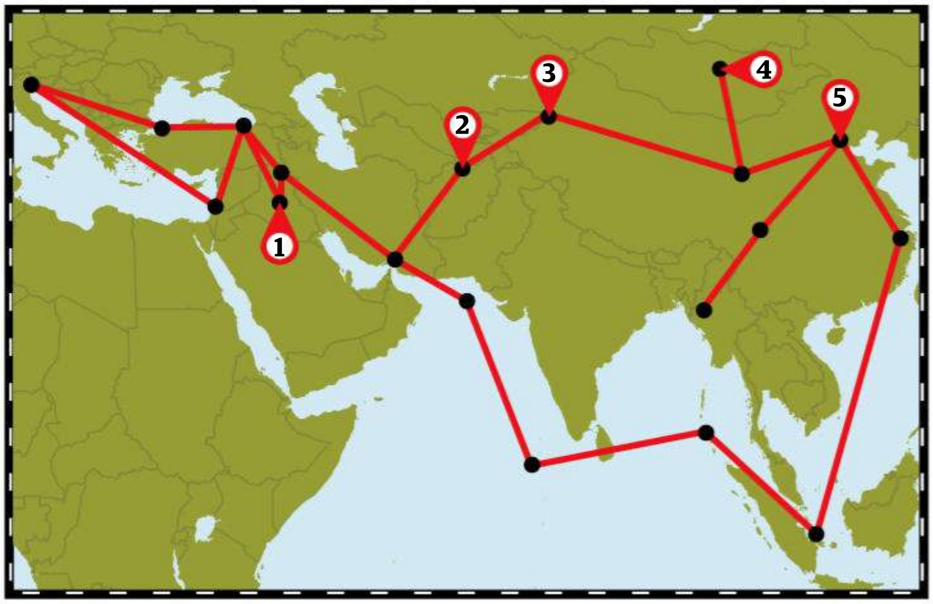
Little wonder, then, that Marco Polo is said to have skirted the city as he headed east around 1272. It certainly remained a dangerous place, and Polo would write of the unfortunate end suffered by a Muslim caliph who had converted to Christianity after supposedly seeing a man move a mountain. In his travelogue, *Il Milion*, he claimed the man had starved to death. Historians, however, believe he was rolled in a rug and had horses ridden over him.

Unfortunately, Baghdad remains just as precarious a city today, but there is so much to see. The medieval school complex, Mustansiriya Madrasah, remains standing from that era, and is part of Al-Mustansiriya. You can also visit the National Museum of Iraq that, despite a large amout of looting following the Battle of Baghdad in 2003, contains numerous priceless artefacts.

Indeed, conservators have repaired damage to the museum's unique collection and restored its galleries. With 13,000 archeological sites in Iraq, the number of items displayed there will surely grow.

*The National Museum of Iraq reopened in 2015 and it can be visited between 8am and 2.30pm daily except Fridays.*

The current Baghdad was built upon the runs of the city the Mongols destroyed, and the museum's curators are hoping to unearth lost treasures



## 2 BALKH'S RUINS

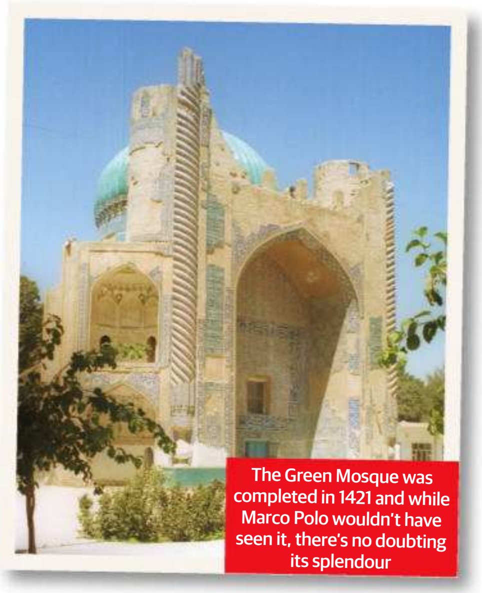
### BALKH

Although Marco Polo described Balkh as a "noble city and a great seat of learning", by the time he arrived at Balkh, Genghis Khan had already wreaked his destruction. His 100,000-strong army of horsemen had destroyed the city and its inhabitants in 1220, leaving a popular part of the major Silk Road routes in ruins.

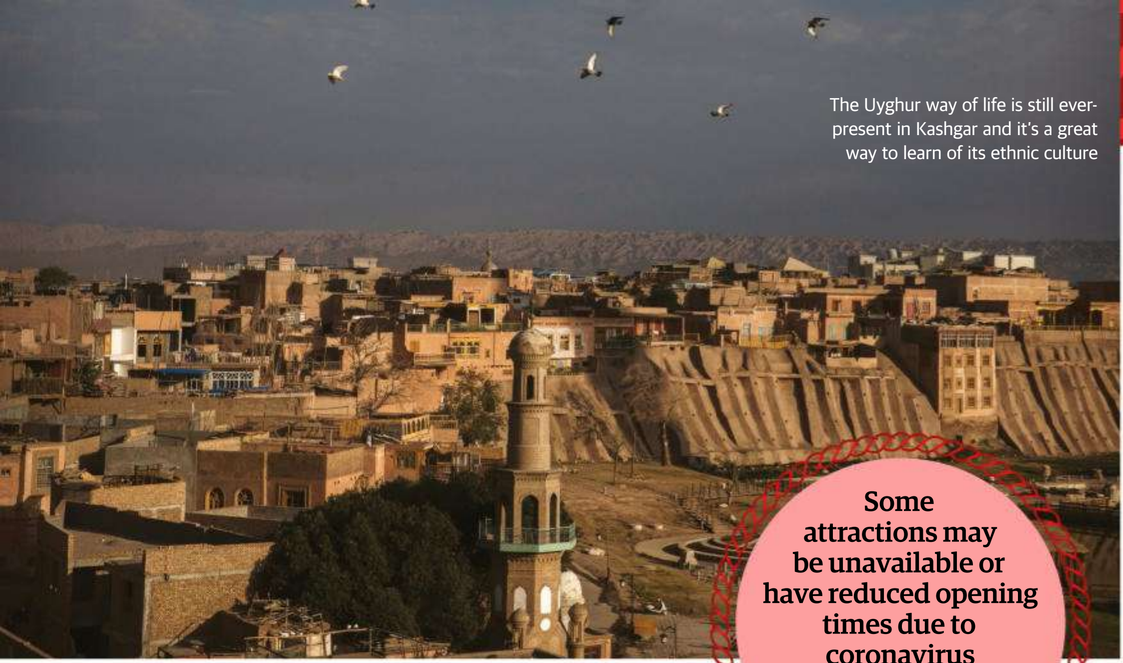
Balkh's capture by the Turko-Mongol ruler Timur saw it rebuilt in the early 15th century and this led to the restoration of its walls and new, grand buildings being erected. It was eventually neglected in favour of the nearby town of Mazar-i-Sharif in the mid-19th century due to an absence of a drainage system and rising disease, but that doesn't mean Balkh isn't worth visiting.

Indeed, some of those age-old structures remain and a wander around the ruins of Balkh as well as the city itself offers a great glimpse of the past – so long as the instability of Afghanistan doesn't put you off. The Balkh Museum – which has suffered looting – also contains historic relics of Islam and should be considered.

*There's no charge to visit the ruins and you can visit daily.*



The Green Mosque was completed in 1421 and while Marco Polo wouldn't have seen it, there's no doubting its splendour



The Uyghur way of life is still ever-present in Kashgar and it's a great way to learn of its ethnic culture

© Getty Images

**Some attractions may be unavailable or have reduced opening times due to coronavirus restrictions. Please check before you travel**

## 3 KASHGAR'S OLD CITY

### KASHGAR

Kashgar came under Genghis Khan's control in 1219 but the Mongols did not leave a major mark on the city. Khan looked favourably upon its inhabitants and this continued when the city came to be ruled by the heads of the Changatai Khangate. As such, the spirit of those times continues to shine.

Marco Polo was certainly taken by Kashgar, which he called Cascar after visiting in 1273. He said its people followed Islam and he noted "many Nestorian Christians who have churches of their own". The inhabitants, he said, lived by trade and handicrafts, had "beautiful gardens and vineyards" and grew a lot of cotton.

You can get a good sense of the buzz that the Silk Road brought by visiting Kashgar's bustling Sunday livestock market, which still sells Uyghur silks. The friendly streets of the old city district are also filled with Gaotai Ancient Homes built with earthed bricks and tied to the cliff. Times, however, are changing.

A lot of the old 'Old City' is being rebuilt to become more 'tourist friendly,' and the local Uyghur people are being displaced. It is, therefore, best to visit sooner rather than later before the historical nature of the area is completely razed to the ground, ironically doing for the city what the Mongols didn't do all those years ago (although hopefully the results won't be as bad!).

*Kashgar is a bustling city that comes alive day and night throughout the week. Ideally visit between June and September to sample the fresh fruit and enjoy the warm weather.*

## 4 KARAKORUM CITY MUSEUM

### KARAKORUM

Once the capital of the Great Mongolian Empire and now a popular tourist destination, Karakorum was a centre of trade along the Silk Road and the seat of immeasurable power over Asian and Eastern Europe. By the time Marco Polo visited and met Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, however, the empire's capital had moved to Beijing.

The beautifully presented exhibits show how the city was built and shed light on life in this former capital

© Alamy

That said, Karakorum remained of symbolic importance and Polo was fascinated by what he saw ("There are wild cattle in that country as big as elephants, splendid creatures", he wrote). Chances are you will be too, for while the city lies in ruins today, it forms part of a World Heritage Site and excavations have been unearthing many a treasure.

A number of artefacts from the Great Mongolian Empire are on display at a small museum giving an eye-opening history of the area's golden era. The collections include writings from the Khans along with religious statues, coins, and bronzes, and the exhibits are regularly updated. For a good sense of the empire, it takes some beating.

*The museum is open between 9am and 6pm daily between April and October and from 10am to 5pm Monday to Friday the rest of the year.*

## 5 MARCO POLO BRIDGE

### BEIJING

Beijing is today the capital of the People's Republic of China, but it once fell into the hands of the Mongols after Genghis Khan led an invasion in 1215. Known back then as Zhongdu, it was razed to the ground within two years only for Kublai Khan to begin rebuilding the city in 1267 once he had ascended to power.

When Marco Polo arrived eight years later, he fell in love with the results and you can too. "The streets are so straight and wide that you can see right along them from end to end and from one gate to the other," he wrote. "And up and down the city there are beautiful palaces, and many great and fine inns and fine houses."

Polo remained in China for 17 years, working for the Khan, from where he also travelled across Asia. If you want somewhere to visit, however, you could do worse than trek to the multi-arched stone bridge over the Yongding River 15 kilometres south of Beijing. It is called the Marco Polo Bridge since the traveller lavished great praise on the original, saying it had "very few equals in the world".

The bridge – which was reconstructed in 1698 following damage from flooding – is also well known for being the location where Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. Today, it is protected from traffic thanks to the construction of a highway next to it in 1985.

*Given the Marco Polo Bridge stretches across the river in the great outdoors there is no charge to visit, but the best time to travel to Beijing tends to be May, June, September and October for less extreme weather.*

The original bridge began to be constructed in 1189 and it was highly praised by Marco Polo

© Getty Images

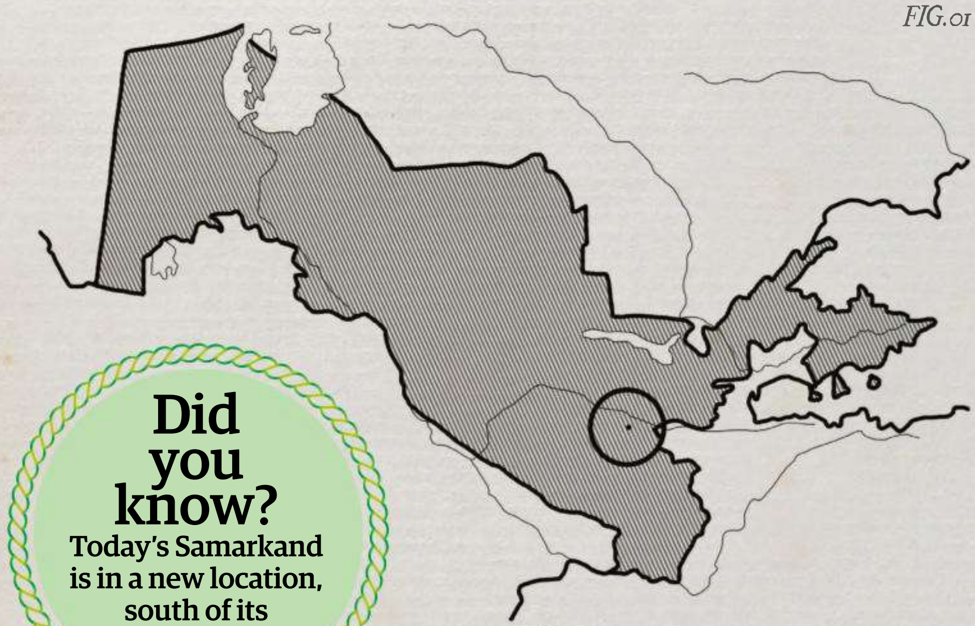
# Time Traveller's Handbook

# Samarkand

**For thousands of years the city of Samarkand has stood at the crossroads of world cultures. Thanks to its abundance of natural resources, humans have been able to live in the region since 1500 BCE. Samarkand has long been established as a centre of trade and commerce, renowned for its production of luxurious exotic crafts and attracting artisans across Asia who wish to make a living. Due to its diversity of peoples, Samarkand became a cornucopia of religions and cultures.**

This all came to an end when the land was invaded, destroyed and burned to the ground by the warlord Genghis Khan. With its stunning architecture in ruins, those who had loved the city were forced to flee it. Now, in 1370, Timur, the founder of the Timurid Dynasty, has grand plans to rebuild Samarkand and re-live its former glory. Still situated at a crucial point on the profitable Silk Road trade route, Samarkand is rising from the ashes to become a culture of trade, commerce, culture and intellect once more.

FIG.01



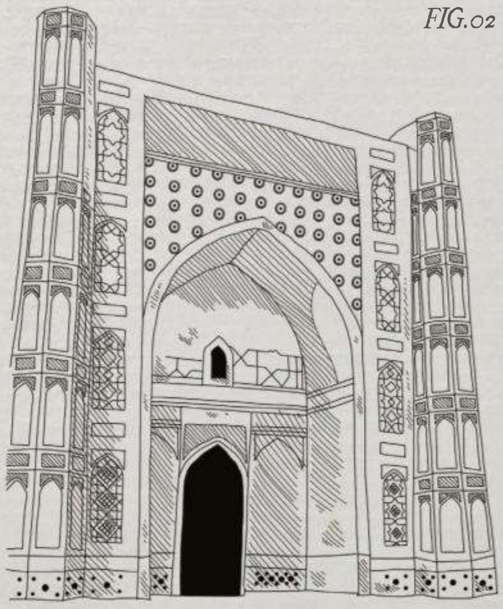
## Did you know?

Today's Samarkand is in a new location, south of its previous site.

## WHERE TO STAY

No matter where you stay in the city there is a chance you can be uprooted at any moment. Samarkand is in a constant state of construction due to Timur's grand vision for his capital city, ordering some buildings to be immediately torn down and rebuilt if they do not meet his exceptionally high standards. He is also not afraid to clear out his citizens' houses if they get in the way of his plans. Of particular note is the mosque built in memory of his wife. Almost as soon as it was built, he declared the entrance archway was too low, and immediately ordered it be pulled down and started again.

FIG.02



## Dos & don'ts

✓ **Feel welcome, no matter your ethnicity or faith.** Timur's armies welcome soldiers based on skill rather than ethnicity, and it is the same in his capital city, which flourishes due to trade with a range of people.

✓ **Keep an eye out for many famous faces of the era.** The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta will visit the city, and Henry III's ambassador, Ruy González de Clavijo, is stationed there.

✓ **Check out the beautiful architecture.** Most notably the Shah-i Zinda necropolis, which includes breathtaking mausoleums and, as the legend goes, houses the body of the cousin of the prophet Muhammad.

✓ **Find the central street through the city.** There you can buy anything in the shops, which have every kind of merchandise.

✗ **Forget to brush up on your Persian.** Although Timur is a Turco-Mongol, Persian culture has been fully embraced, and the primary language used by his scribes is Persian.

✗ **Worry about invasion.** The city is only accessible by roads and is separated from its neighbours by deep ditches and walls that run eight kilometres in circumference.

✗ **Assume the Khans have power.** Although officially Genghis's descendants are in charge, in reality they are puppet rulers. Timur is the one in control.

✗ **Argue against Timur's re-building.** Those who had their houses torn down were sent away with no warning, taking with them only what they could carry.

## WHO TO BEFRIEND

**Timur**

In the early-13th century, the thriving city of Samarkand was invaded and burned to the ground by Genghis Khan. However, it has experienced a rebirth thanks to Timur. The leader has made the city the capital of his expanding empire and encouraged trade and commerce, forcefully moving skilled artisans and intellectuals from all across Asia to his new capital. Although Timur is a warlord responsible for the deaths of approximately 17 million people, he is also a great patron of the arts and architecture. He would be a very powerful influence and ally to have on your side.

**Extra tip:**
**An easy way to befriend Timur is to pander to his second love after war: architecture. He is obsessed with creating magnificent monuments, and his dedication is so great that he had the Arab proverb, "If you want to know about us, examine our buildings," inscribed upon one of them.**

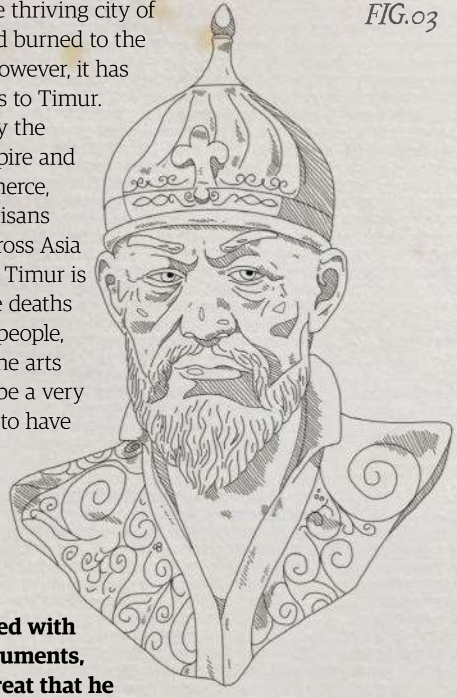


*FIG.03*

## WHO TO AVOID

**Timur's enemies**

Although the conqueror is a powerful friend to have, he also makes a very fearsome foe. Although he is known to show mercy to those who surrender to him, his brutality towards enemies and rebels is infamous. Many cities that revolt against him are punished by brutal slaughter of innocent citizens. In Isfahan, he ordered the creation of 28 towers constructed out of 1,500 human heads. Anyone he suspects of corruption or betrayal is immediately executed. The tax collectors or those in power are usually the first to go, but he often spares the artistic and intellectual citizens. To prevent your own head becoming a feature in his grisly towers, avoid associating with his enemies at all costs.

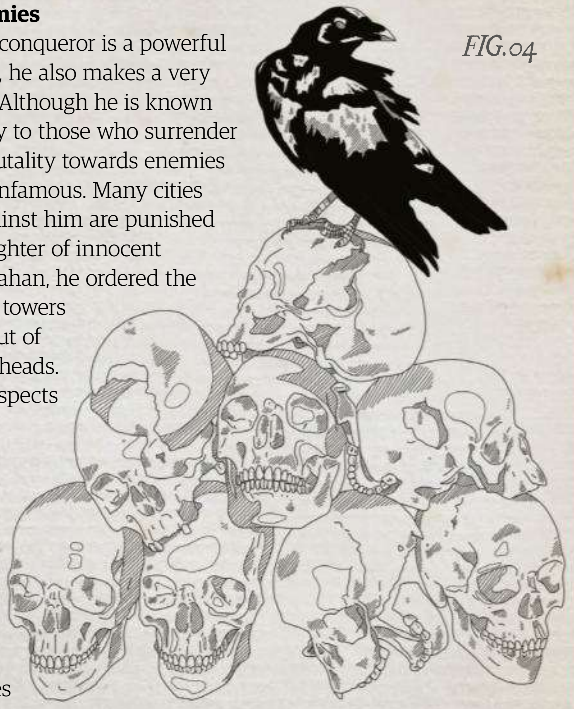


*FIG.04*

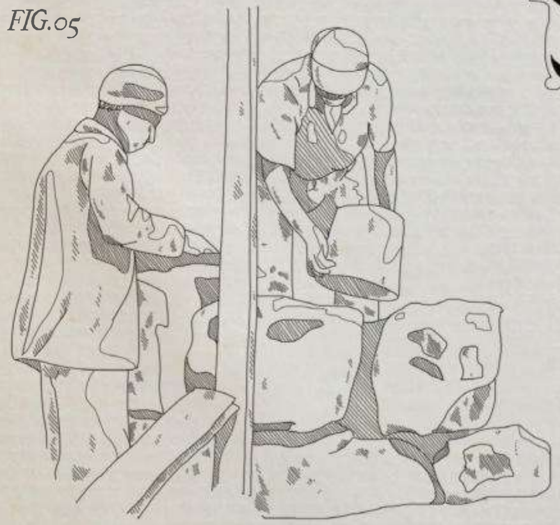
## Helpful skills

The essential skills to help you succeed on one of the most profitable trade routes in history

### Construction

Samarkand is in the midst of rapid expansion and rebuilding. The old houses are being torn down to create a new street that extends from one side of the city to the other with shops all along it.

*FIG.05*



### Painting

This era is the golden age of Persian art. Chinese artists have heavily influenced the Persians resulting in a unique and stunning craft combining calligraphy, illustration and binding to produce stunningly colourful books.

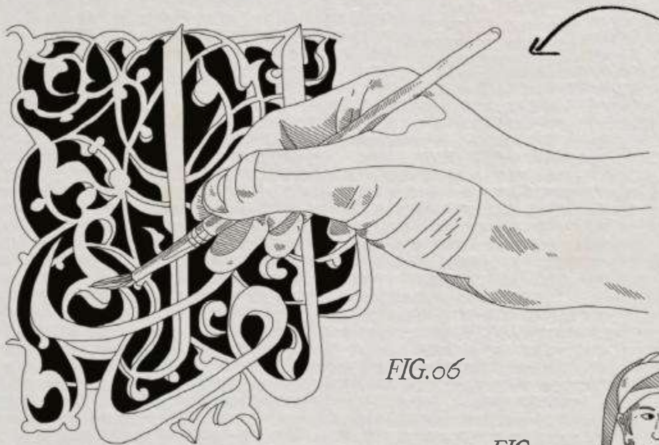


*FIG.06*

*FIG.07*

### Commerce skills

Samarkand is known most of all as a city of commerce; you will do well if you know how to sell goods. The city is especially renowned for its markets full of leather, linen, silk, spices and exotic fruit like melon and grapes.

# Tamerlane's reign of terror

## *The so-called 'Scourge of God' built an empire that left people quaking from Damascus to Delhi*

Written by Alice Barnes-Brown

**The bloody reputation of Mongol ruler Tamerlane precedes him. Remembered for his gruesome military campaigns in which tens of millions of people may have been slaughtered, the great warrior Tamerlane – otherwise known as Timur – possessed a vast territory, stretching from Delhi to the Mediterranean. As the most powerful ruler in the 14th-century Islamic world, he was both feared and respected by his contemporaries. However, his legacy in the West mainly comes from obscene caricatures, such as Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, in which the savage emperor treats human life with as much respect as he would an ant. But was 'Timur the Lame' merely a simple, brutish warrior, or was there more to the Chagatai Khanate warlord?**

Timur defeats the Mamluk sultan at the Siege of Damascus in 1400

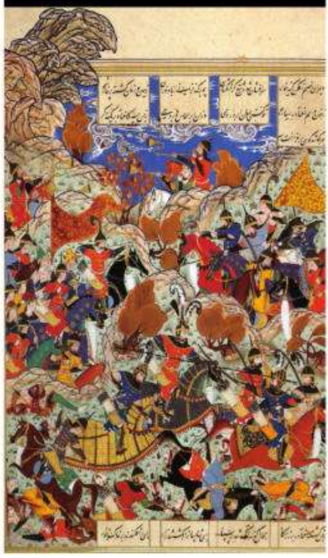


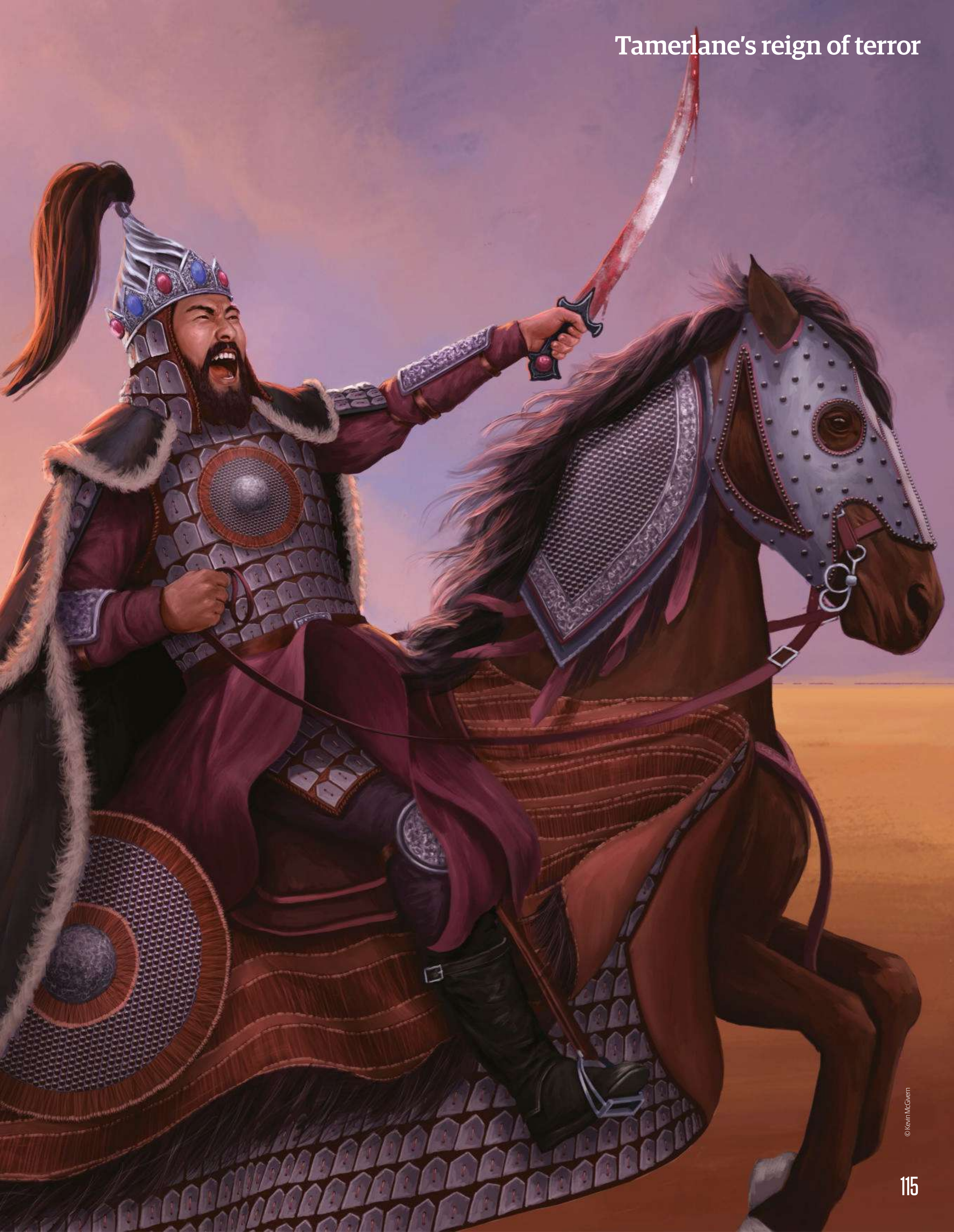
Image source: Wiki

A century and a half before Timur's birth, Genghis Khan roamed the plains of Central Asia. Famously spending his life pillaging and murdering, when Genghis died, the Mongol conqueror split the spoils of his empire between four of his descendants. Chagatai, his second eldest son, was granted a large tract of land. Becoming known as the Chagatai Khanate, the steppes, deserts and mountains of the region made it one of the most beautiful parts of Genghis Khan's old empire – but it was also one of the most remote.

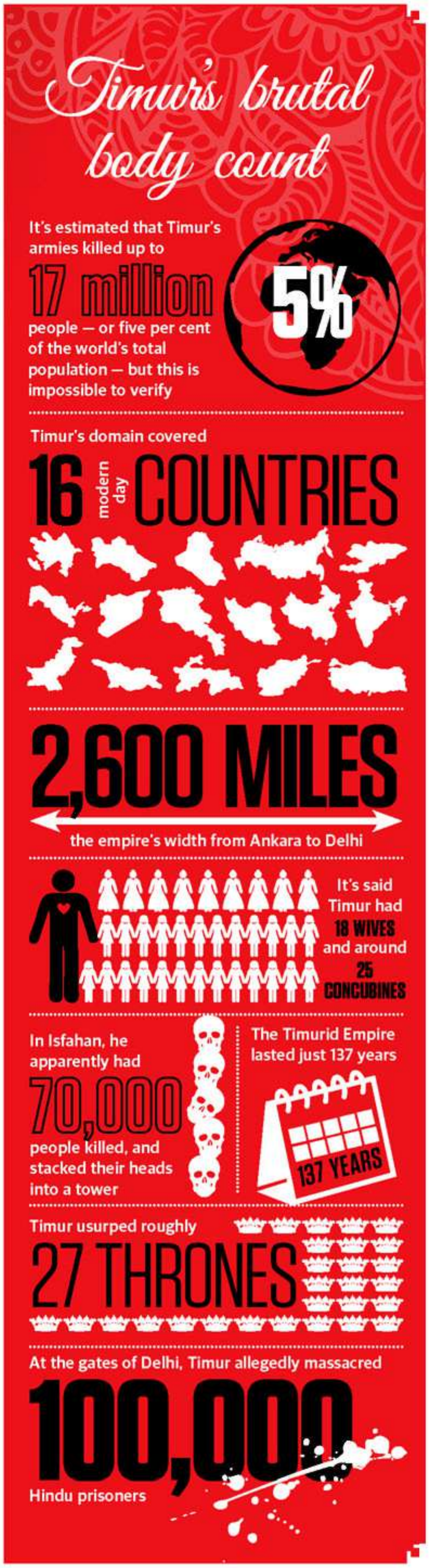
Their neighbours to the north, the Golden Horde, were a scary bunch. Ruled by Genghis Khan's grandson, these lawless tribes pillaged towns and villages from eastern Europe to the Altay Mountains. The Chagatai Khanate, meanwhile, largely subsisted on nomadic herding, and its command structure was heavily fraught with internal divisions. The khanate quickly split into two parts – the powerful east was called Moghulistan and the less fortunate west was known as Transoxiana.

It was in this divided world that Timur was born in 1336. His father, Taraqai, was a minor nobleman from the Barlas tribe – a group of nomads that made their home in the area south of Samarkand. The young Timur never stayed in one place for all that long, as his clan would repeatedly uproot themselves (and their livestock) to find the best grazing pastures whenever the seasons changed.

Realising that there was profit to be made in illegal activity, Timur turned to petty crime. His first exploits involved rustling sheep from neighbours and he quickly added banditry to



© Kevin McGivern



## Timur's brutal body count

It's estimated that Timur's armies killed up to

**17 million**

people – or five per cent of the world's total population – but this is impossible to verify

Timur's domain covered

**16** modern day **COUNTRIES**

**2,600 MILES**

the empire's width from Ankara to Delhi

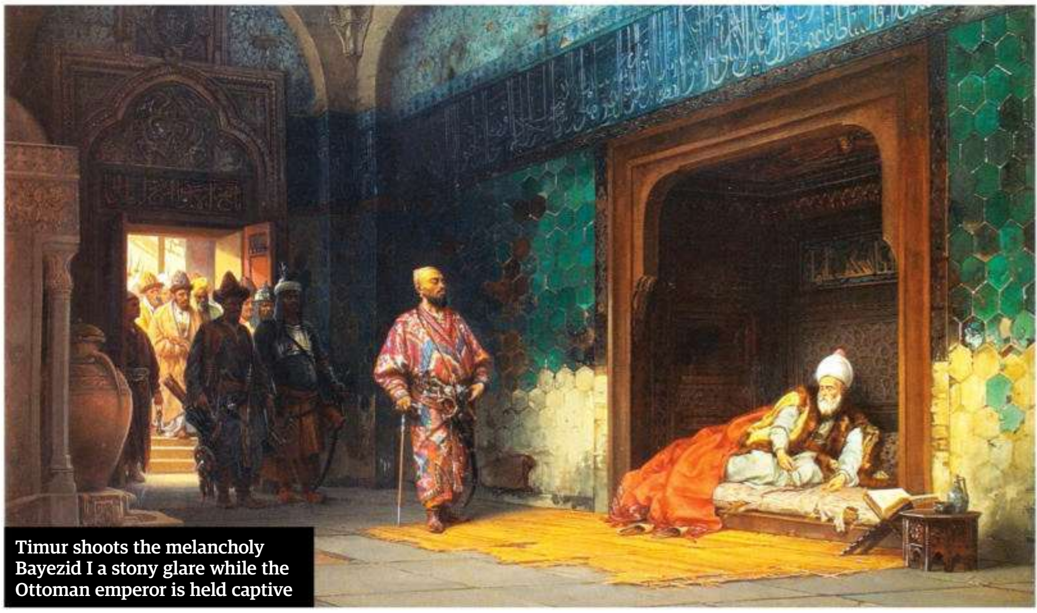
It's said Timur had **18 WIVES** and around **25 CONCUBINES**

In Isfahan, he apparently had **70,000** people killed, and stacked their heads into a tower

The Timurid Empire lasted just 137 years

Timur usurped roughly **27 THRONES**

At the gates of Delhi, Timur allegedly massacred **100,000** Hindu prisoners



Timur shoots the melancholy Bayezid I a stony glare while the Ottoman emperor is held captive

Image source: Wiki

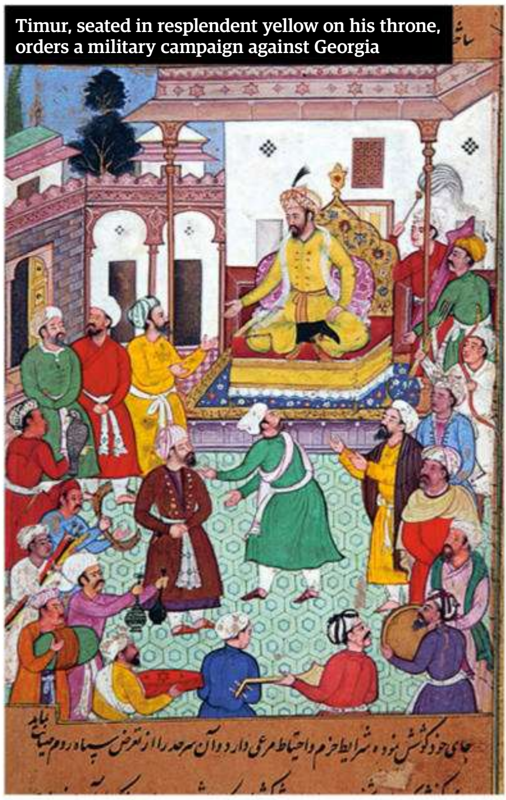
his list of dodgy dealings, making travellers throughout the region tremble in their boots. A man with a clear talent for violence, Timur apparently worked as a mercenary in his 20s, and was once seriously injured by an arrow during a skirmish. Unable to walk properly on his right leg or raise his right arm, this unfortunate incident led to him being christened Timur-i Leng – a Turkic nickname meaning 'Timur the Lame' – which Europeans misinterpreted as 'Tamerlane'.

For some, this injury would mean the end of their crime sprees, but Timur's were only just beginning. His ambitions knew no bounds, and when the ruler of Transoxiana died in 1357, Timur spotted an unmissable opportunity. Aligning himself with the khan of Moghulistan, Transoxiana's archenemy, the powerful duo installed themselves on the vacant Transoxiana throne. Ilyas Khoja, the khan's son, was proclaimed king, but Timur was the power behind the crown. However, he wouldn't be content with being second best for long and in 1364, he switched his loyalties yet again.

This time, Timur rushed to the side of his brother-in-law, Amir Husayn, who had a score to settle with the khan of Moghulistan, and by 1366, he and Timur had conquered all of the Transoxiana region. Still, Timur had no desire to share power with anyone and turned on Husayn. In a fight to the death at the city of Balkh, Husayn was assassinated and Timur proclaimed himself the unchallenged ruler.

As he saw it, Timur's mission was to restore Mongol rule to the glory days of Genghis Khan, reigning supreme over lands from Korea to the Caspian Sea. Never one for diplomacy, Timur rushed through a political marriage to Husayn's widow, Saray Mulk Khanum. She was a direct descendant of Genghis Khan on her father's side and Timur believed that he would be able to use this connection with the great Mongol ruler to make him a more convincing leader in the eyes of the people.

> "Timur's mission was to restore Mongol rule to the glory days of Genghis Khan"



Timur, seated in resplendent yellow on his throne, orders a military campaign against Georgia

Image source: Wiki

# Empire of blood

In his quest to be the next Genghis Khan, Timur conquered much of Asia

### **Smyrna** 1402

The port city of Smyrna, defended by the Knights Hospitaller after it was won during the Crusades, was too tempting a target for Timur to resist. In a bold move, the city refused to pay tribute to Timur, so he attacked it with siege engines and blocked the harbour to prevent people from escaping. After killing many Christian refugees and Muslims alike, he burned the city to the ground.

### **Ankara** 1402

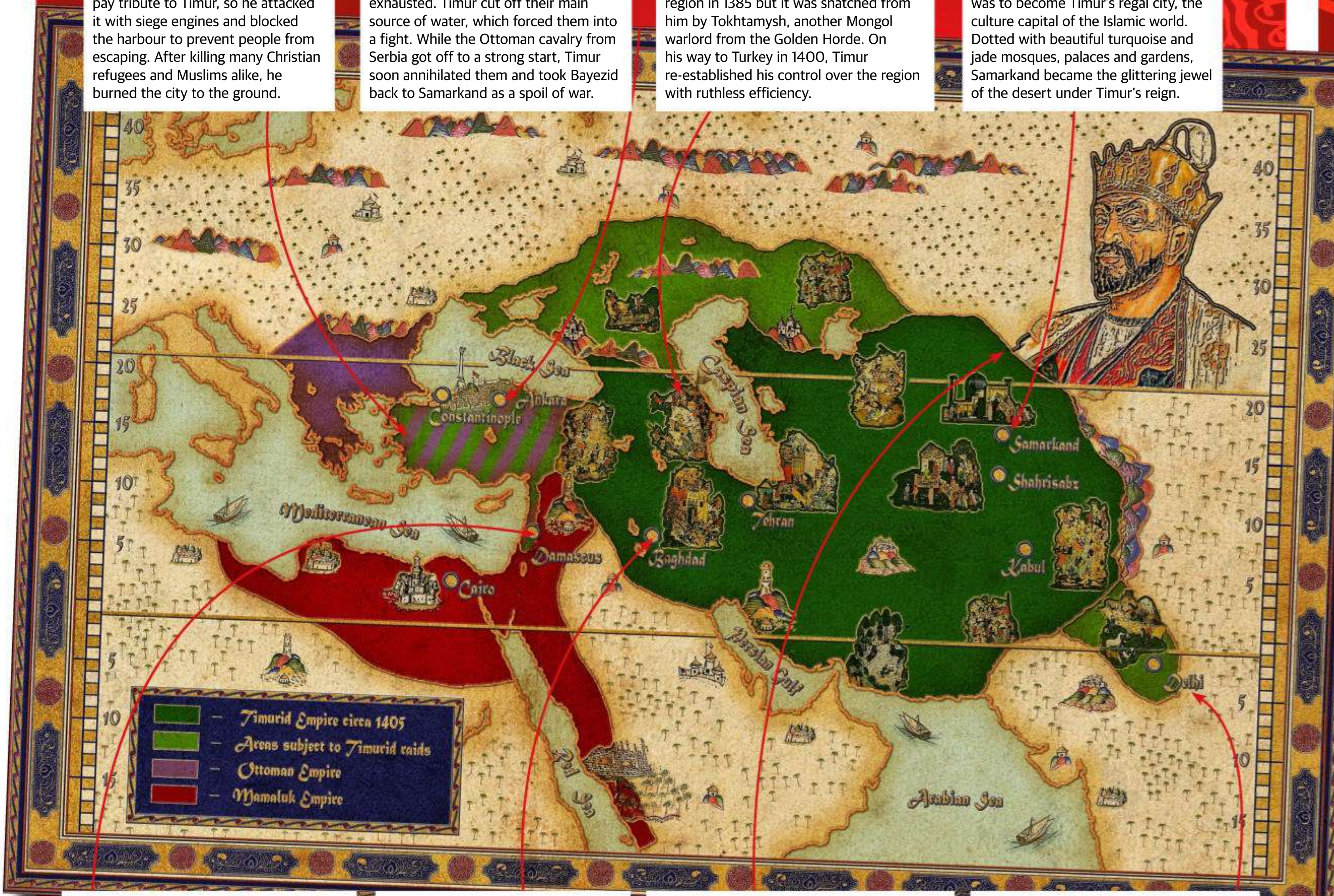
Timur marched to Ankara to meet his adversary, Bayezid I, deep within Ottoman territory. After leading his army across the desert in the heat of summer, the Ottoman emperor's troops were exhausted. Timur cut off their main source of water, which forced them into a fight. While the Ottoman cavalry from Serbia got off to a strong start, Timur soon annihilated them and took Bayezid back to Samarkand as a spoil of war.

### **The Caucasus** 1385

At the crossroads of Western Asia and Europe, Azerbaijan and its Christian neighbours Georgia and Armenia became a battleground for many empire-builders. Timur first conquered the Caucasus region in 1385 but it was snatched from him by Tokhtamysh, another Mongol warlord from the Golden Horde. On his way to Turkey in 1400, Timur re-established his control over the region with ruthless efficiency.

### **Samarkand** 1370

Timur, upon defeating the rulers of the Chagatai Khanate and his own brother-in-law, proclaimed himself amir (general) and restorer of Genghis Khan's legacy. Samarkand was to become Timur's regal city, the culture capital of the Islamic world. Dotted with beautiful turquoise and jade mosques, palaces and gardens, Samarkand became the glittering jewel of the desert under Timur's reign.



© Nicholas Forder

### **Damascus** 1401

When citizens of Damascus heard Timur was on his way, they bolted the doors and took to the city walls in an attempt to defend themselves. Incredibly, Damascus held out for a full month before surrendering. Timur allegedly promised them security but once he had gained entry to the city, his true nature was revealed. He first extorted a huge ransom from its citizens, then let his men loose to do as they pleased. Only infant children and the elderly were spared death.

### **Baghdad** 1401

By the time Timur had finished pillaging this once great garden city, there was nothing left but rubble. Tens of thousands of its citizens were slaughtered as vengeance for not surrendering immediately and its key civic buildings were destroyed. The only ones to survive Timur's relentless siege were the artists and craftsmen, who were sent to Samarkand to embellish Timur's grandiose city.

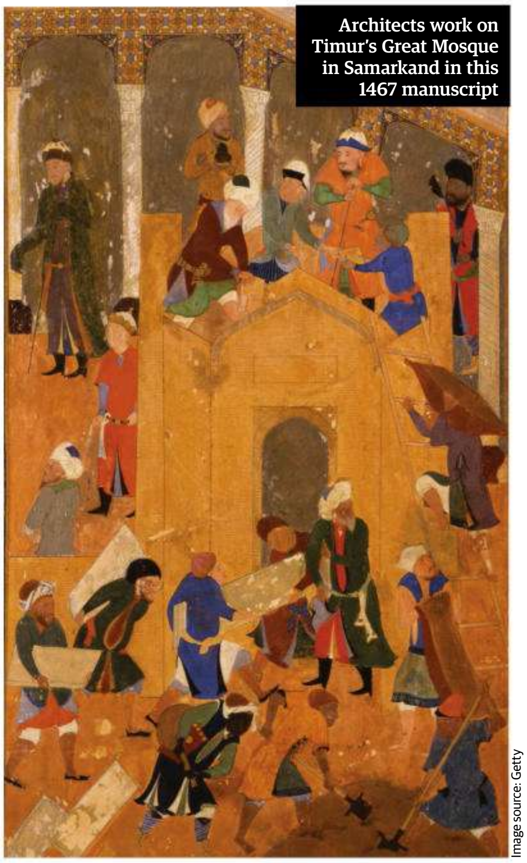
### **Syr Darya River** 1405

On his way to challenge the Ming dynasty, Timur and his army stopped at the town of Otrar to wait for the bitter cold weather to pass. However, Timur fell ill. His doctors desperately tried to cure him, even by placing him in a bath of ice to bring his fever down. He apparently spoke eloquently to his companions, telling them to pray to Allah to have mercy on him. He died shortly thereafter.

### **Delhi** 1398

After Timur crossed the Indus river, he headed straight for the terrified Delhi Sultanate. One story goes that Timur understood war elephants were easily scared, so he sent camels with fire on their backs to wildly charge at the great beasts. The elephants ran away and the battle was won. The Mongol conqueror quickly laid siege to the rich city of Delhi, which was left entirely in ruins – leaving the few survivors of his attack homeless.

If they weren't completely sold on the idea, they'd soon meet a grisly end. Timur wasted no time in showing his enemies who was boss in the most brutal way possible. He spent the first ten years of his rule establishing supremacy over his neighbours, demanding they surrender to him. If they refused, he would destroy their cities and enslave or murder everyone inside. This was also a brutal example for any potential future conquest.



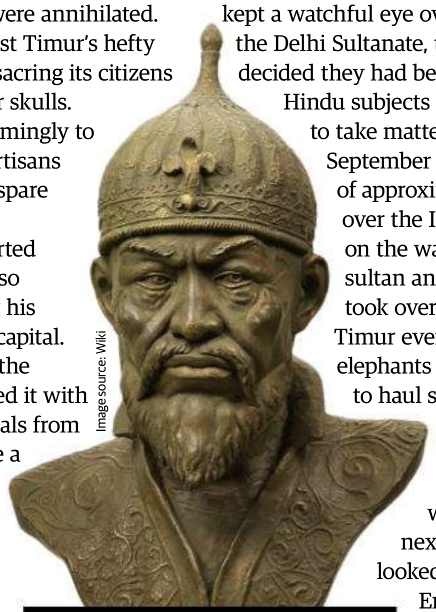
Architects work on Timur's Great Mosque in Samarkand in this 1467 manuscript

Image source: Getty

In 1383, Persia found itself on Timur's hit list. The once mighty empire was weakened by internal strife and division, which Timur took full advantage of. Beginning with the conquest of Herat, he plundered the ancient city of its treasures and destroyed many of its important landmarks. Rumours of such horrific treatment reached other Persian cities and knowing that Timur would soon reach their walls, they had a decision to make. Some places, like Tehran, surrendered without question and Timur allegedly treated them mercifully. Others would not go down without a fight, so they were annihilated. In Isfahan, which rose up against Timur's hefty taxation, he responded by massacring its citizens and building towers out of their skulls.

The only group of people seemingly to escape such horrors were the artisans and craftspeople. Timur didn't spare them out of the kindness of his heart, though. He forcibly deported them to the city of Samarkand so they could get to work building his elaborate vision of an imperial capital. The city was to be the heart of the Islamic world and so Timur filled it with artists, architects and intellectuals from across Asia. Samarkand became a thriving hub of culture in the middle of Central Asia.

As well as simply being vainglorious, Timur's reasons for building Samarkand as an ode to God and Islamic culture were entirely practical. He was keen to legitimise his rule by both invoking the iconic Genghis Khan, and stressing his own role as a defender of Islam. Timur's personality cult centred on the notion that he was the 'Scourge of Allah', placed on Earth by God to defend the true religion. While he constantly flouted the rules of Islam – namely, that Muslims should not kill – he invoked God often as a means of support for his military campaigns, legitimising them in the people's eyes.



A facial reconstruction of Timur based on measurements of his remains

Image source: Wiki

But as the empire expanded, it started to incorporate peoples of different faiths, who thus had to be forced into submission. It was on this pretext that Timur invaded India in 1398. Having kept a watchful eye over the Muslim rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mongol conqueror decided they had become too tolerant of their Hindu subjects and it was time for him to take matters into his own hands. In September 1398, Timur and his army of approximately 90,000 men crossed over the Indus River. Destroying cities on the way, he quickly defeated the sultan and laid waste to Delhi, which took over a year to lick its wounds. Timur even allegedly captured 90 war elephants from India and used them to haul stone back to Samarkand for a great mosque he was building in his capital.

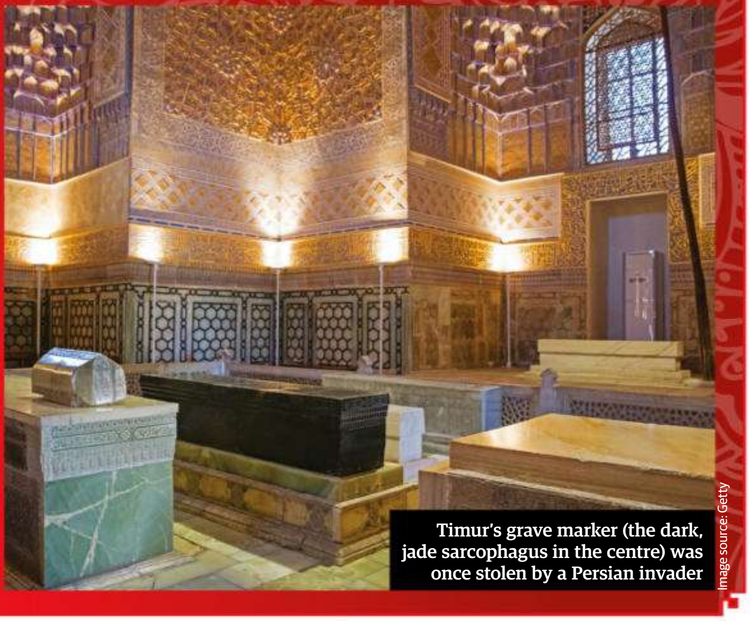
A year later, Timur was on the hunt for his next conquest. This time, he looked west to the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt. While both had powerful Muslim

## *The curse of Tamerlane*

When Timur was buried in 1405, he wanted to ensure that no one would disturb his eternal slumber. Allegedly, he had the words "when I rise, the world shall tremble" and "whomsoever disturbs my tomb shall unleash an invader more terrible than I" inscribed on his tomb, so that potential grave robbers would hopefully get the message and leave him alone.

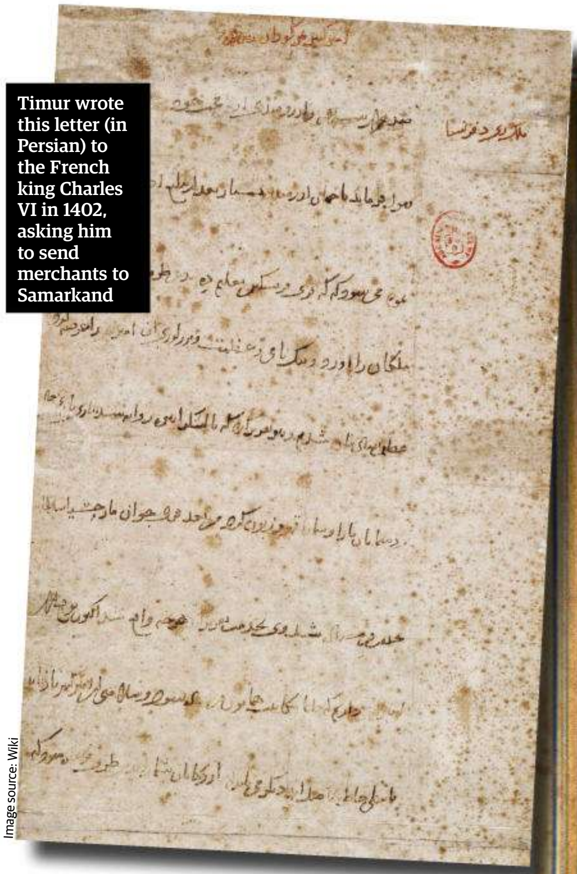
Unfortunately for Timur, this wasn't actually an effective deterrent. In 1740, a Persian invader named Nadir Shah broke into the Gur-e-Amir and was so impressed by Timur's magnificent sarcophagus that he risked stealing it. He carried the jade slab back to Persia but it broke in half in transit. Incidentally, the shah suffered a lengthy run of bad luck thereafter. His son had a very close brush with death and the shah was advised to return the stone. But the spirit of Timur had apparently not forgiven him and the shah was assassinated a few years later.

Soviet archaeologist Mikhail Gerasimov was next to try his luck. As Uzbekistan was then part of the USSR, he travelled to Samarkand in 1941 to experiment on Timur's remains. On the night of 22 June 1941, he removed Timur's skeleton from its place. As the sun rose the next morning, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, his large-scale invasion of the USSR. Coincidence, or the ruthless Timur causing misery from beyond the grave?



Timur's grave marker (the dark, jade sarcophagus in the centre) was once stolen by a Persian invader

Image source: Getty



Timur wrote this letter (in Persian) to the French king Charles VI in 1402, asking him to send merchants to Samarkand

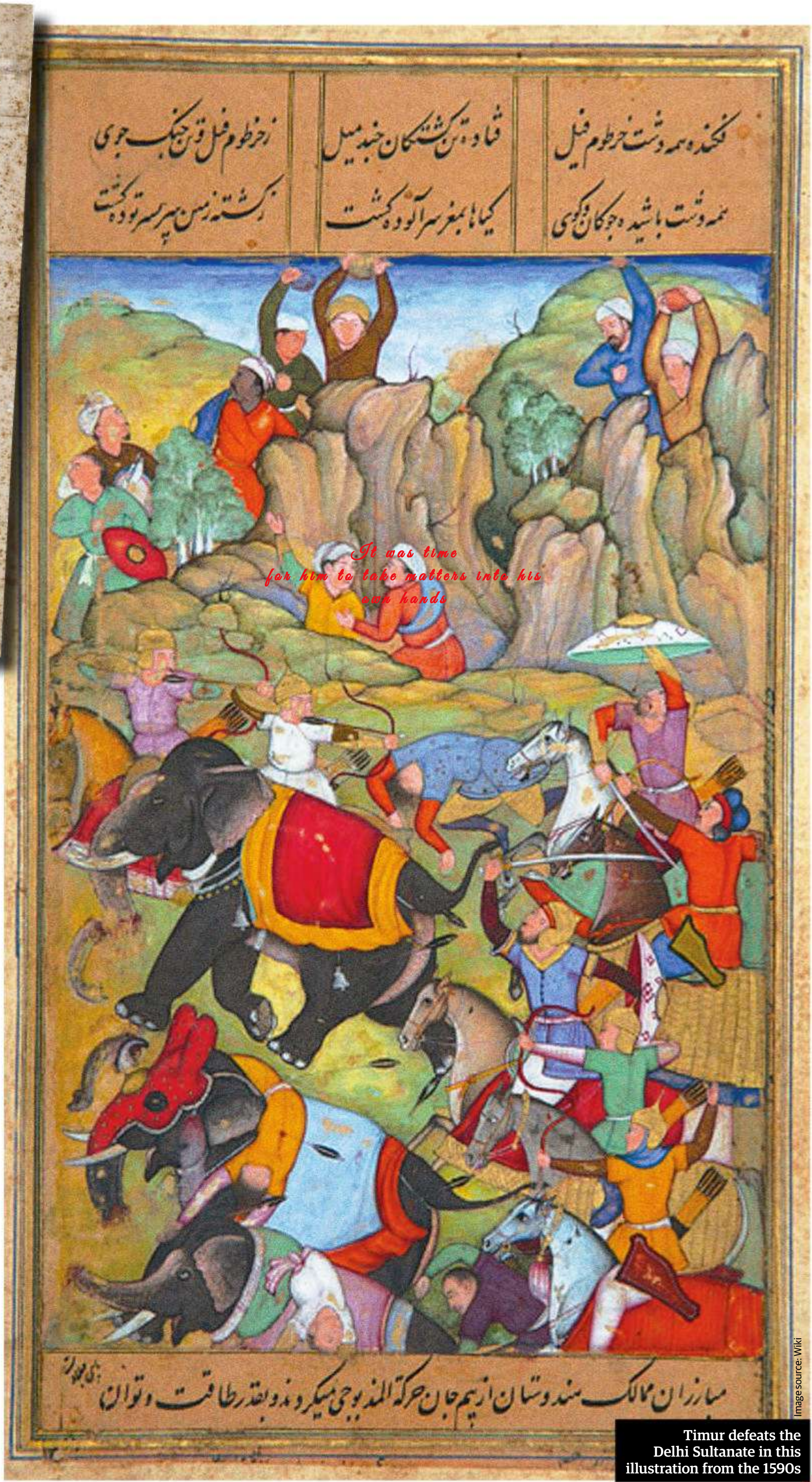
Image source: Wiki

> "It was time for him to take matters into his own hands"

rulers, Timur saw them only as usurpers who had stolen territory that rightly belonged to the Mongols. The Ottoman sultan, Bayezid I, for example, had offended Timur by taking Mongol lands in Anatolia. Timur even tried to warn him off by sending him some serious hate mail in 1399. In one no-holds-barred letter he wrote, "Thy obedience to the Qur'an, in waging war against the infidels, is the sole consideration that prevents us from destroying thy country".

However, Bayezid wasn't fazed. He responded with a cutting remark: "What are the arrows of the flying Tatar against the scimitars and battle-axes of my firm and invincible Janissaries?" So an enraged Timur set out to test the Ottoman elite guard's invincibility. On his way to Constantinople, Timur reconquered Azerbaijan and Syria before inflicting yet more brutality, this time on beleaguered Baghdad. Up to 20,000 of its citizens were killed and its monuments destroyed. After all, these ancient cities could not possibly create potential competition for Samarkand.

When he finally reached Turkey, Timur allegedly promised not to shed blood if the town



It was time for him to take matters into his own hands

Image source: Wiki

Timur defeats the Delhi Sultanate in this illustration from the 1590s

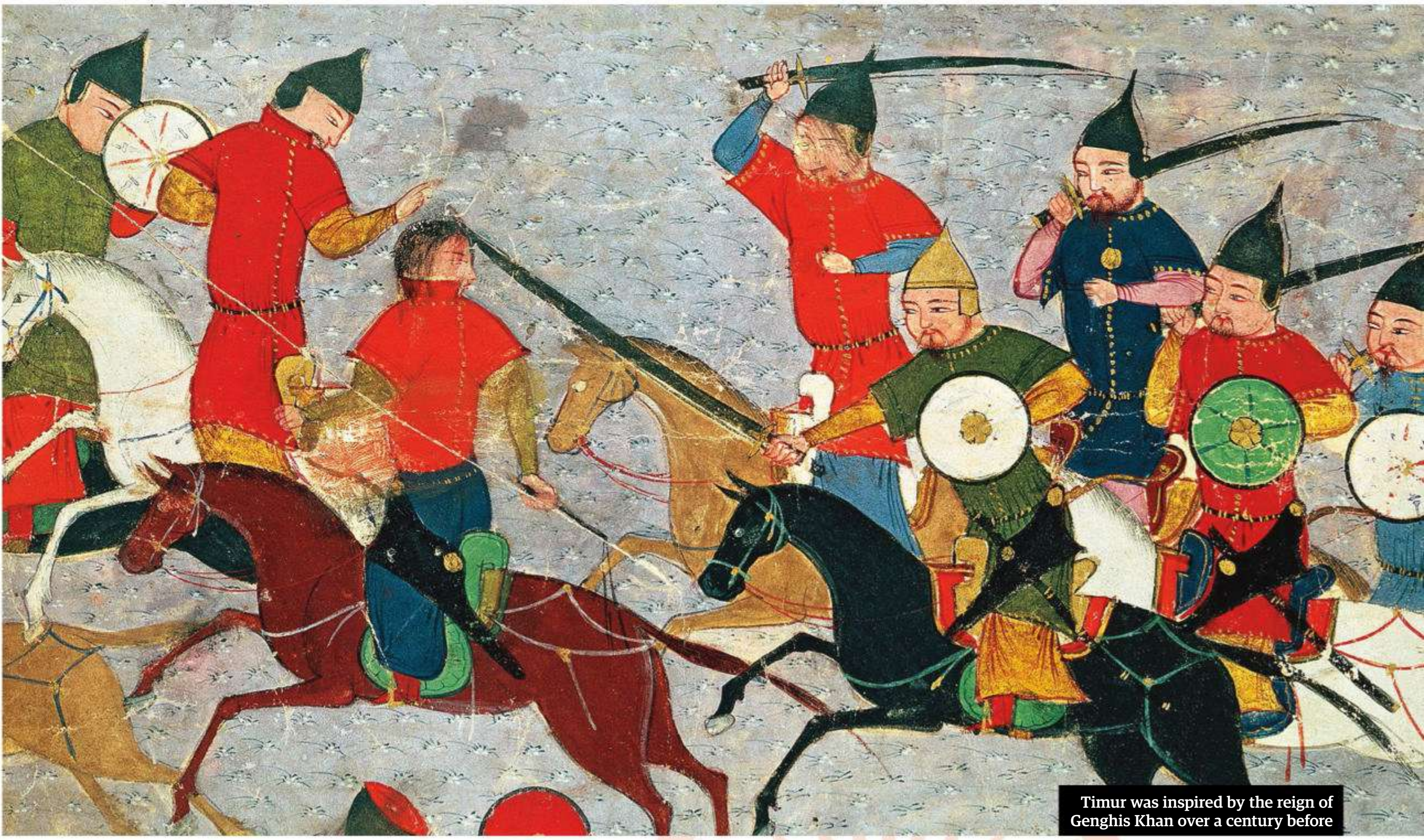
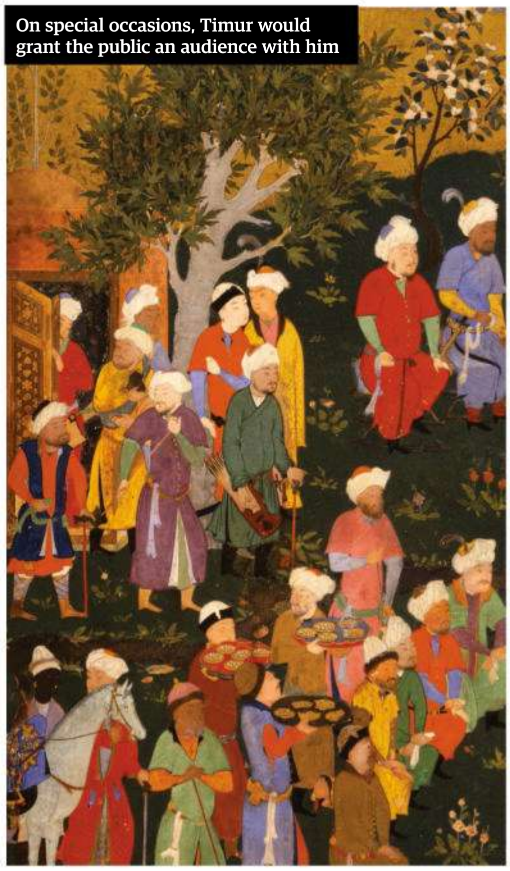


Image source: Getty

Timur was inspired by the reign of Genghis Khan over a century before



On special occasions, Timur would grant the public an audience with him

Image source: Getty

> *"Timur evidently placed great significance on these feasts, as one guest was punished for turning up late by having his nose pierced like a pig"*

of Sivas surrendered. Trusting his word, they did. It's said he had 3,000 of the townspeople buried alive, and Timur maintained that he had kept his promise. After all, there was no blood.

Near Ankara, Bayezid met Timur's army on 20 July 1402 for a dramatic showdown. Timur was a shrewd tactician, so he circumvented Bayezid and attacked his army from behind. After a short battle, the sultan was captured and dragged back to Samarkand kicking and screaming. There, he was allegedly subjected to a variety of imaginative humiliations – from Timur using him as a footstool to being put on display in a golden cage.

Ironically, some rulers in Western Europe supported Timur. They thought he was helping them to achieve Christian goals by keeping the Ottomans – a powerful Islamic empire right on their doorstep with a beady eye on Hungary – at bay. Upon learning of his victory at Ankara, England's Henry IV and Charles VI of France sent messages declaring their congratulations to Timur. The Spanish kingdom of Castile went even further and dispatched an envoy, led by Ruy González de Clavijo, to Samarkand.

Clavijo described in fantastical detail the wondrous and exotic goings-on he saw at Timur's court. Arriving in 1404, he described Timur's 15 palaces, which blended nomadic and Islamic traditions. Some of them were essentially grand tents that could be packed up and moved when necessary. Treated as honoured guests, the Spaniards dined each night at lavish feasts, which were always preceded by bouts of heavy drinking – allegedly following Mongol tradition. Timur evidently placed great significance on these feasts, as one guest was punished for turning up late by having his nose pierced like a pig.

Just after Clavijo and his crew started on their long journey back to Madrid in November 1404, Timur set off for what would turn out to be his last hurrah. Samarkand had been trading with Ming China for a long time, but Timur had grown tired of being treated like a vassal. For example, when a message from China arrived in 1395 calling the

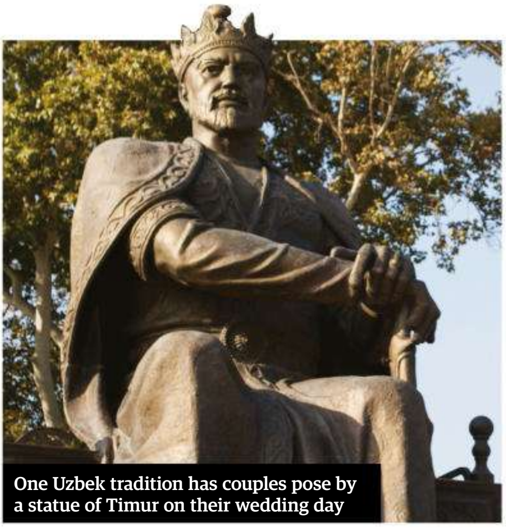


Image source: Getty

One Uzbek tradition has couples pose by a statue of Timur on their wedding day

Ming emperor "lord of the realms of the face of the earth", and treating Timur like an inferior, he decided to detain the Chinese messengers. When China dispatched more envoys to find out what happened to them, Timur supposedly imprisoned the second batch as well.

Timur's plan was to overthrow the Ming and replace them with the Yuan dynasty, Mongol rulers established by Kublai Khan. While he normally embarked on his expeditions in the spring, to take advantage of good weather, he departed Samarkand in December 1404 with an army of approximately 200,000 troops. His chief astrologers had told him that the stars were in favourable alignment. What could go wrong?

Unfortunately for Timur, the stars turned out to be more favourable for China than they were for him. He fell ill on the frosty banks of the Syr Darya River in Uzbekistan and died – possibly of cold – in February 1405. With no leader to inspire a victory, Timur's army decided to turn around and head back home. The fearsome conqueror was embalmed in fragrant oils and placed in an elaborate ivory coffin for the journey to his final resting place, the beautiful Gur-e-Amir in Samarkand, his treasured city.

Like Genghis Khan, Timur had divided his territory between his male descendants, but ultimately his empire was built on fear, terror and pillaging rather than good governance. Timur's successors would spend the next few decades fighting each other over the land, and soon his vast empire would crumble.

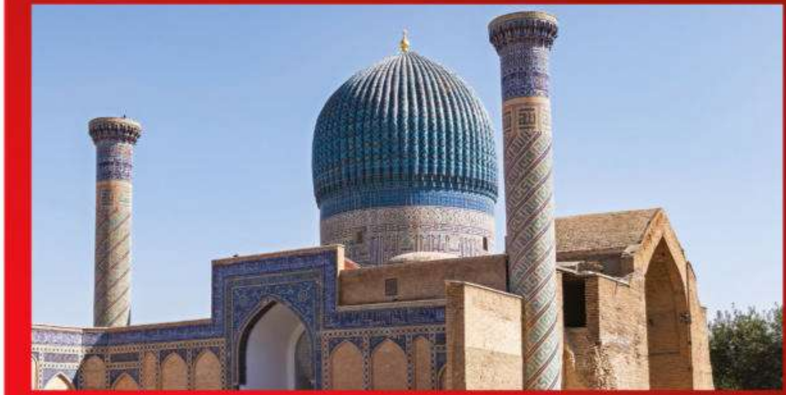
However, the legacy of the 'Sword of Islam' continues to this day. His double-great-grandson Babur founded the iconic Mughal dynasty of India, a ruling family responsible for creating stunning, Timurid-inspired monuments like the Taj Mahal and Delhi's Red Fort. While Timur was thoroughly deserving of his bloodthirsty reputation, he left a unique visual impression on the city of Samarkand, and transformed the area from a neglected desert outpost to a centre for cultural, intellectual and religious exchange for generations to come. Not bad for a man who began his career as a lame sheep bandit.

## The crossroad of cultures

When he wasn't away on campaign or killing people in droves, Timur loved to construct great monuments to his power and wealth. While only a few structures still survive, they give us a unique insight into his personality and ambition. Intending to make Samarkand a great capital, Timur envisioned a city returned to the glory days of the Silk Road, bustling with people from all parts of his empire.

However, his methods of achieving this goal were no different to the ways he conducted war. He forced people to come from territories he had conquered, and treated his architects very badly indeed if they did not please him. But Timur appears to have taken something of a carrot-and-stick approach to construction projects. According to Clavijo, he threw cooked meat and coins to builders working on the foundations to encourage them to work faster. However, if they didn't meet his unrealistic deadlines, it would be the end of them.

The result was a stunning, well-designed city that was filled with ornate public squares, madrassas, mosques, gardens and all manner of palaces. Even after Timur's death, the Samarkand region continues to be a place of great beauty, as his successors developed on the conqueror's original vision.

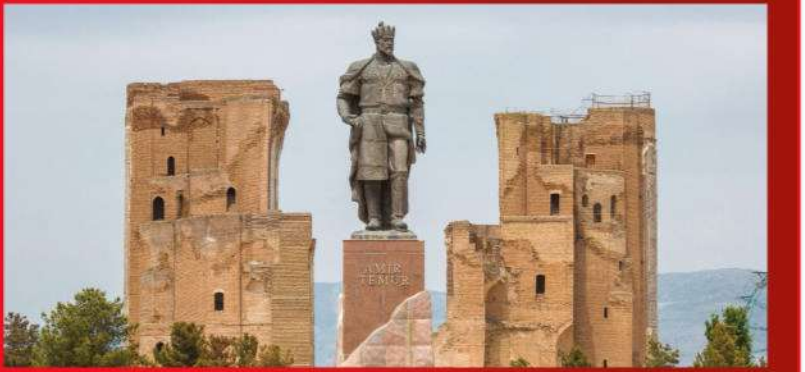


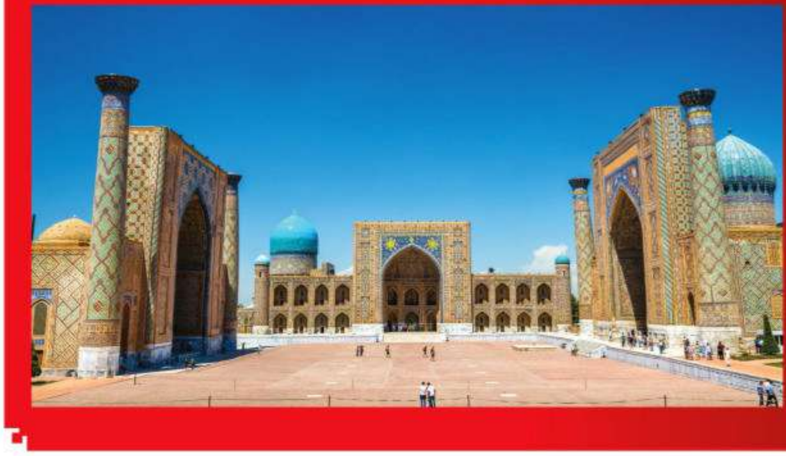
### Gur-e-Amir

Timur's tomb in Samarkand, the Gur-e-Amir, is covered in elaborate blue tiling. Topped with a trademark dome, Timur's grave is marked with a stunning slab of jade, rumoured to be the largest ever found at the time.

### Aq Saray Palace

After winning a resounding victory in the town of Shahrisabz, Timur commissioned an incredible white palace to stand on the site. Today, only the ruined walls of the great hall survive – it was once one of the largest of its kind.





### The Registan

The Registan was built soon after Timur's death and this public square bears his influence everywhere you look. On each side is a madrassa – a place of learning – adorned with incredibly lavish decorations influenced by other parts of the Timurid Empire.

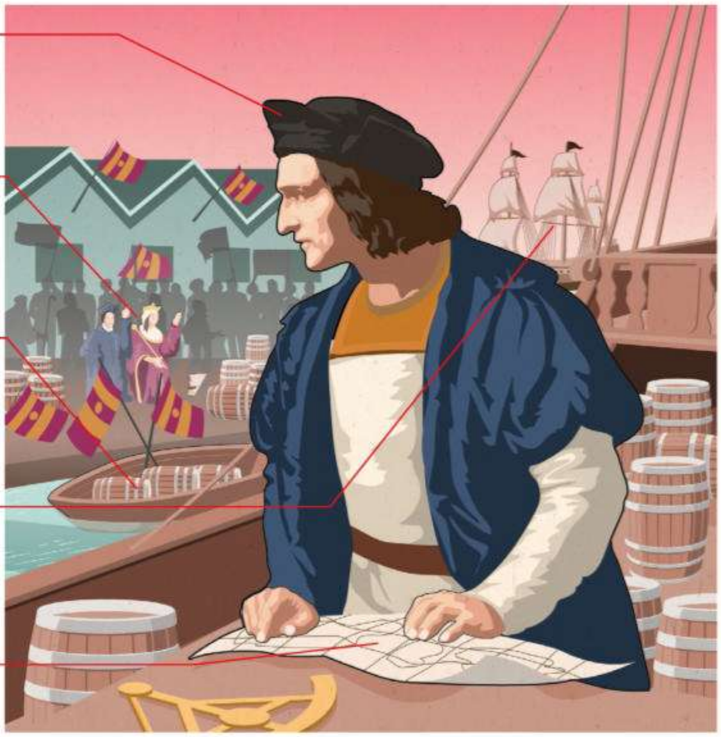
Images source: Alamy

# How to establish a trade route

## *Get rich or get lost Europe to Asia, 15th – 17th century*

The earliest evidence of long distance trade was between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley in modern-day Pakistan, with exotic spices transported back and forth via camel train from around 3000 BCE. Lapis lazuli and the components of bronze were transported along routes that would one day become the Silk Roads.

During the Age of Exploration, European merchants used hi-tech ships to speed up the process. Discover how they established trade routes and how this led both to the sharing of ideas and bloody warfare.



### Understand the objective

Columbus set sail in search of wealth, seeking lucrative goods that could be piled on to ships and taken to Europe.

### Find a wealthy patron

If you're not rich enough to fund the fact-finding trip, get some help. Christopher Columbus was financed by Queen Isabella I of Castile, after agreeing to share whatever treasures he found.

### Pack supplies

Have an idea of distance to ensure there's enough food and drink on board, otherwise some planned stops may be in order. Columbus set sail with enough provisions to last a whole year.

### Take more than one ship

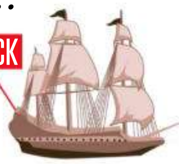
Uncharted waters can be dangerous, so bring a spare ship or two. Columbus set sail with three, but only two returned when his flagship, the Santa Maria, hit a reef off of Haiti and sank.

### Find a shortcut

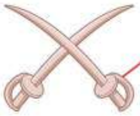
Do your homework like Italian explorer Christopher Columbus – he reckoned crossing west across the Atlantic would be shorter than south around Africa.

### *What you'll need...*

A CARRACK

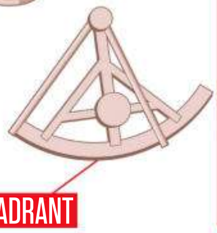


WEAPONS

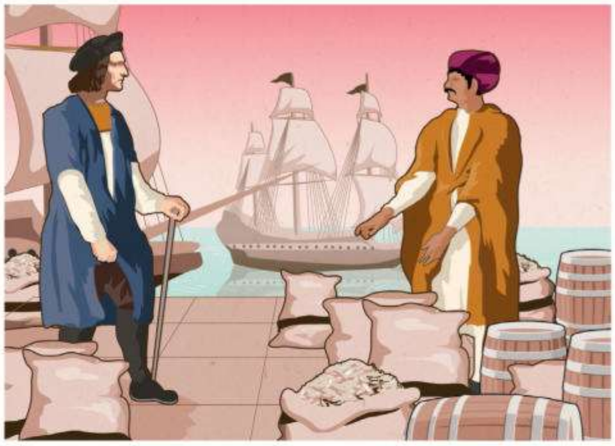


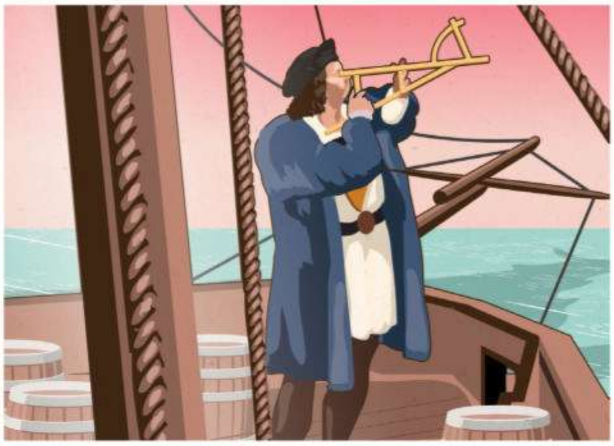
20-30 CREW MEMBERS

SPANISH SILVER



QUADRANT





### 01 FIND A SUPPLIER

If there is an item you need but you can't find a producer or supplier growing, making or herding it locally, look further afield. You could import tasty pepper, nutmeg, cloves or cinnamon, from Asia, but understand Arab and North African merchants that control the existing trade routes hike up their prices and often take a long time to deliver them.

### 02 HEAD FOR THE SEA

Cut out those middlemen by seeking direct deals instead. Avoid going by road because you'll probably bump into them and test the waters by sponsoring a voyage or becoming a navigator. Take advantage of navigation technology by using a caravel – a small ship for exploration – to seek a suitable sea route to channel your goods through.

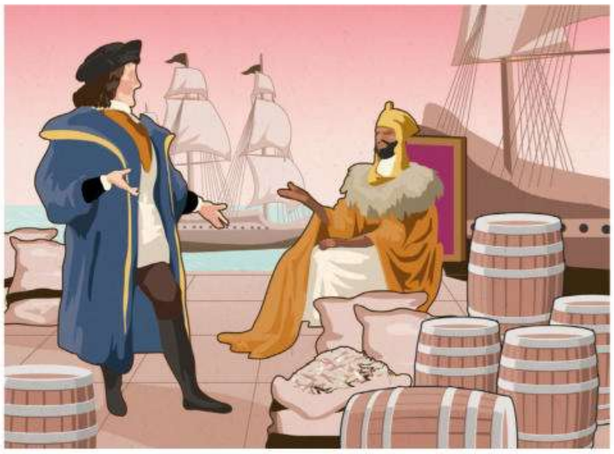
## How not to... lose control of your supplies

Europeans craved many spices from the East during the Age of Exploration. But the most sought after was nutmeg, a spice native to the Banda Islands in the Moluccas of Indonesia that was believed to be an hallucinogen, a protector against plague, and an aphrodisiac.

Initially, the Portuguese seized control of the territory, colonising the islands in 1512. But after Portugal fell under the control of Spain in 1580, the Dutch formed the Dutch East Indies Company in 1602 and later established a treaty with Banda village chiefs – only for it to fall apart when the Bandas broke the terms, leading the Dutch to slaughter thousands.

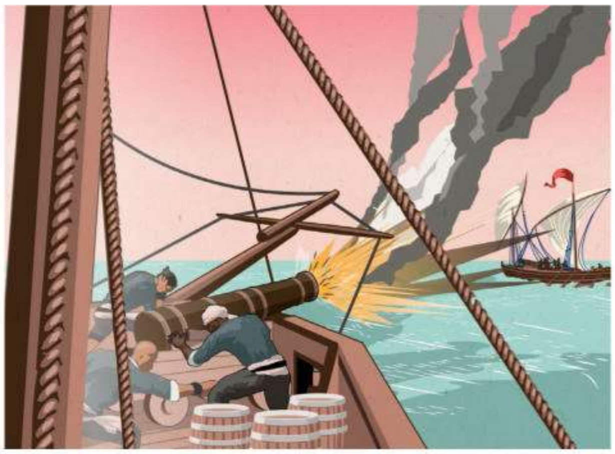
While the Dutch East India Company established a near-monopoly, the British fiercely controlled an island called Run. It led to battles that saw the Dutch take Run in exchange for Manhattan in the Treaty of Breda (1667). But while this handed the Dutch full control over the nutmeg trade, it couldn't retain it forever. Britain worked out how to cultivate nutmeg in Malaysia and India in 1809, making the Dutch trade route far less lucrative.

Image source: Wiki



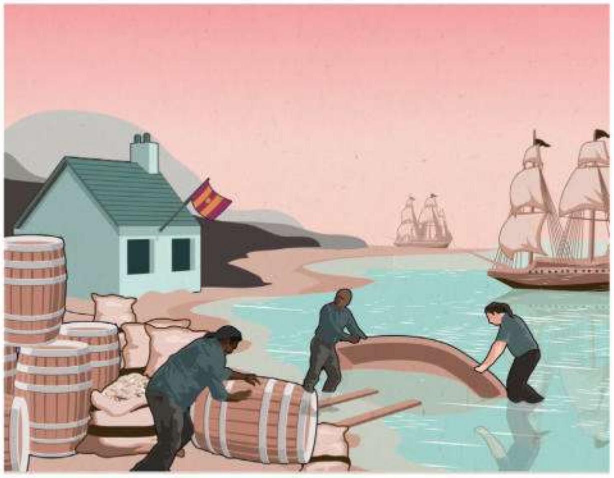
## 03 STRIKE THE DEALS

With an ideal route figured out, begin striking direct trading partnerships by mooring at important South-East Asian ports and entering negotiations. Make sure you have plenty to offer. Huge amounts of Latin American silver for use as currency is likely to go down well but if you have items that others will want to buy, then your wealth will grow.



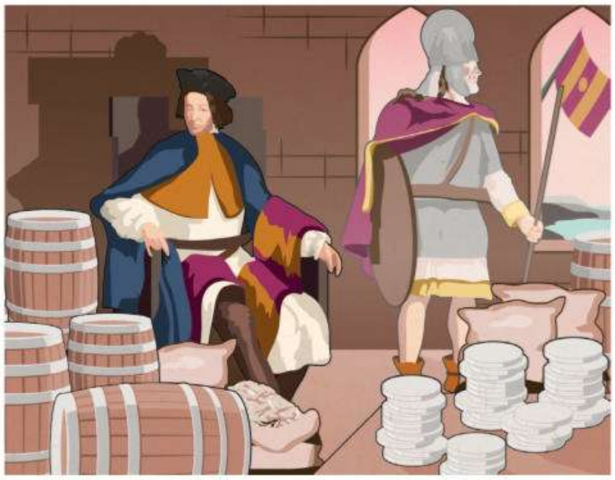
## 04 START SHIPPING GOODS

Now get on with the task of importing and exporting goods, getting around the issue of the Ottoman Empire blocking land routes and controlling the ancient sea routes from the East. Use a carrack (a large ship) to transport the goods to Europe. Use military might if pirates try to intercept your ships, and take annoying merchants hostage if need be.



## 05 SECURE TRADING POSTS

Secure your monopoly by controlling ports for taxation purposes and establish a series of trading posts along the coast. Over time these places will grow into hamlets, villages and bustling towns as more people stop by and visit to trade goods and share news, keeping the wheels of commerce turning. They are also safe places to stop and shelter.



## 06 CONSIDER COLONISATION

Be aware that other European countries are known to duel over certain items so you may want to start planting your nation's flag in a larger way. Colonise any territory that has an abundance of desirable goods and raw materials not found back home and sell items that you have to their people. Better to sell more than you buy, as mercantilists would say.

Illustrations © Ed Crooks

## 4 famous... trade routes

Image source: Wiki

### THE SILK ROAD

**CENTRAL ASIA**

**130 BCE – 1453 CE**

Running across Central Asia, connecting East and West, this route saw cities and towns flourish from the lucrative trade in silk.

Image source: Wiki

### OLD SALT ROUTE

**GERMANY 956 – 1700**

Covering a distance of 100 kilometres, this route traded salt from Lüneburg in northern Germany to Lübeck on the coast.

Image source: Wiki

### INCENSE ROUTE

**EURASIA 600 BCE – 100 CE**

Thousands of tons of frankincense and myrrh – used for embalming and perfumes – were transported via land and sea from India to the Mediterranean via Arabia.

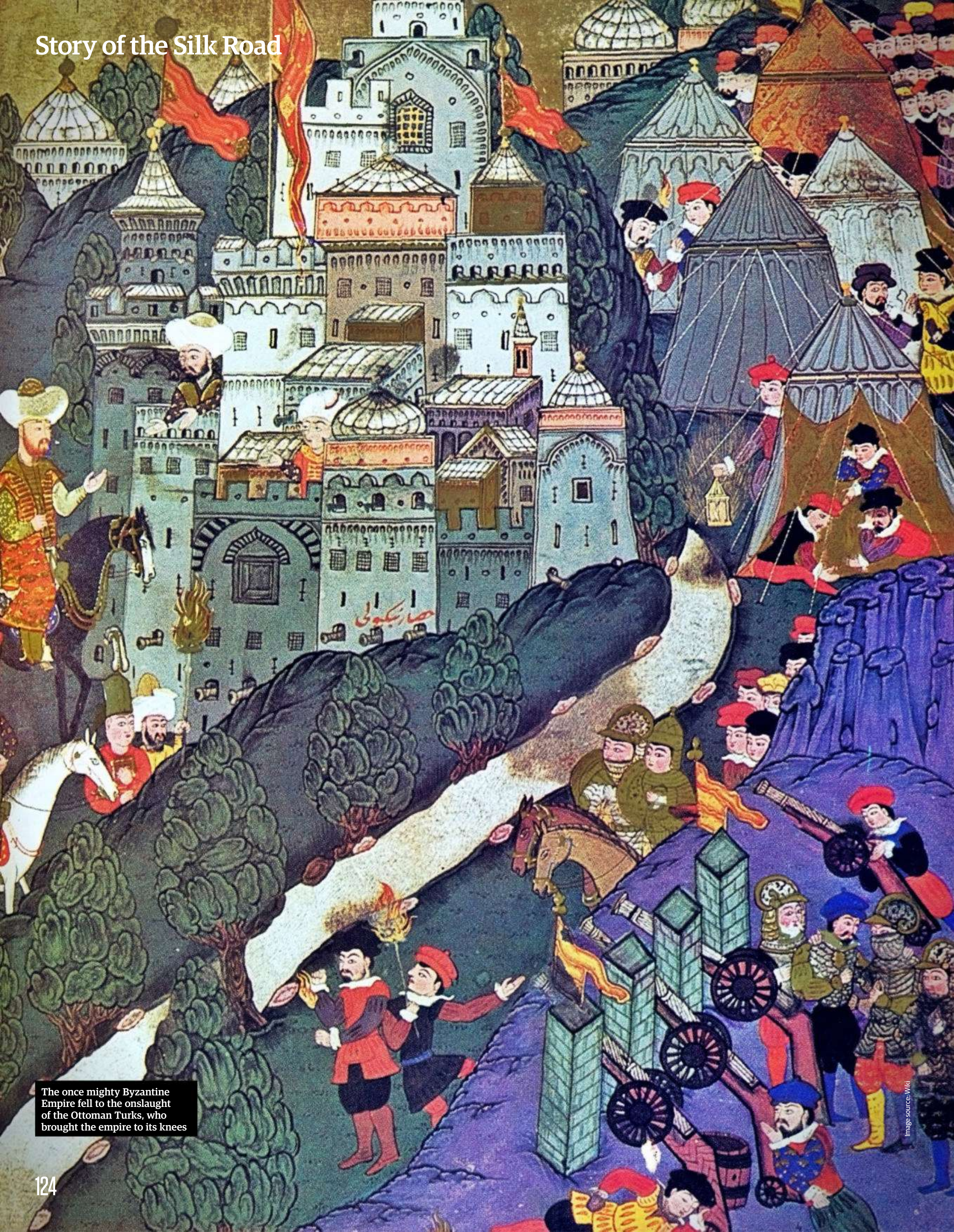
Image source: Wiki

### TEA HORSE ROAD

**SOUTHWEST CHINA**

**600 – 1900**

Covering about 2,250 kilometres, this web of routes traded tea and warhorses as it cut through mountains and across rivers.



The once mighty Byzantine Empire fell to the onslaught of the Ottoman Turks, who brought the empire to its knees

Image source: Wiki

# Decline and rebirth

## *The Silk Road allowed the expansion of trade and wealth. Yet these famed routes faced a steep decline before they were once again reborn*

Written by Catherine Curzon

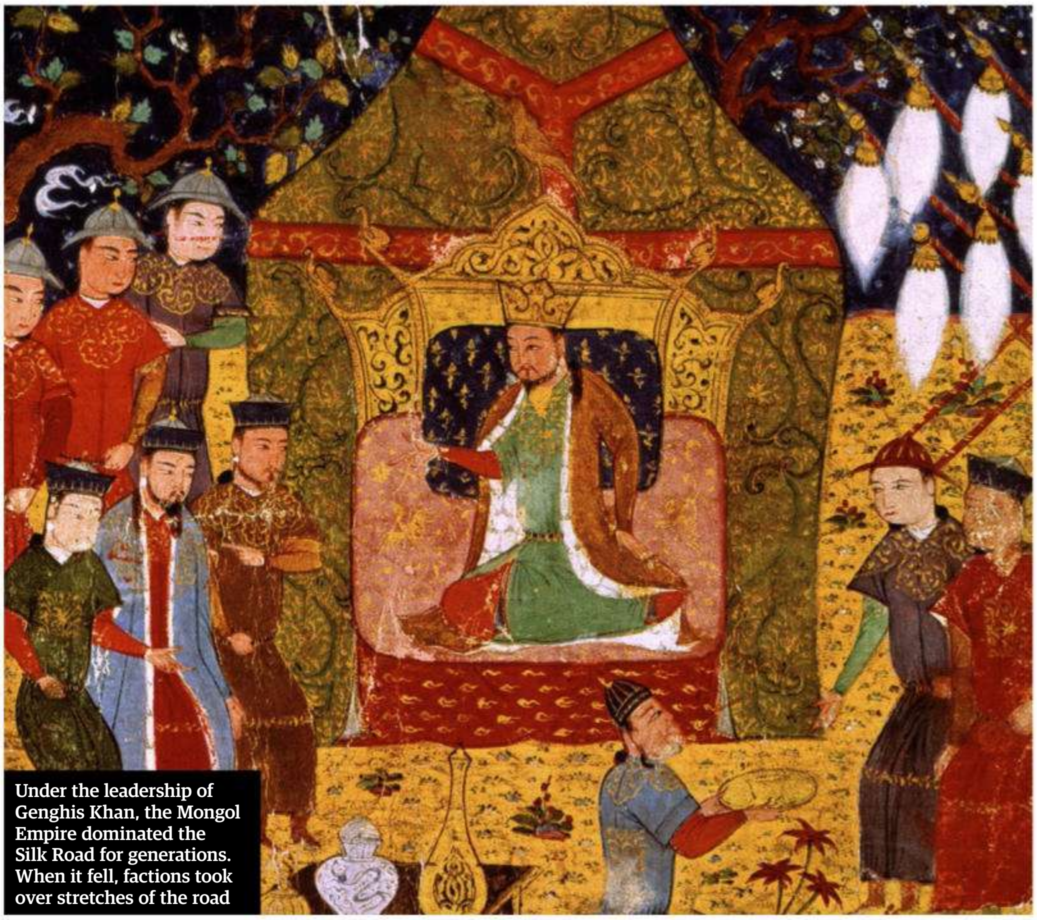
**Over centuries, the Silk Road became one of the most important trade routes in the world. It connected the Far East to the world beyond, and allowed culture, philosophy and art to reach new audiences just as it brought trade to new lands. Yet the Silk Road was rife with hazards and, as those who used it were to find to their cost, subject to the shifting balance of sometimes unstable power.**

For nearly two centuries, the continent was ravaged by the Byzantine-Ottoman Wars as the Christian Byzantine Empire came under repeated and ultimately devastating attack from the Muslim Ottoman Turks. The Byzantine Empire was riven with internal division and external conflicts. It was ripe for conquer and the Ottomans were swift to take advantage. During the 14th century they moved through Byzantine territory, taking it bit by bit.

Along the Silk Road were many important destinations, but few were as vital as Constantinople, the capital city of the crumbling Byzantine Empire. Constantinople was a vastly wealthy trading hub and it lay at the end of the Silk Road. From here, goods could leave the harbour for transit across the world and chief among them was silk, which the Byzantine Empire imported for a fortune until it discovered the secret of its production themselves, and began its own exports. The strategic position and wealth of Constantinople had once made the Byzantine Empire one to be reckoned with, but it had also made it a target.

Constantinople survived assaults by the armies of would-be invaders, but in 1453, the end came for the once great city. As the Ottoman Empire grew, it chipped away at Byzantine territory until Constantinople stood almost alone, ready for its last stand. When the Ottoman force launched a brutal assault on the city, barraging the walls with artillery, Constantinople fell to an army that outnumbered Byzantine troops by almost 200,000. Once the city was in their hands, the Ottomans immediately shored up existing trading routes, but used their dominance of the region and its maritime and overland routes to increase the cost of doing business to merchants. Muslims now controlled both of the major ports that were used to take Silk Road goods into Western Europe by sea and any previous arrangements, all of which

> "The strategic position and wealth of Constantinople had once made the Byzantine Empire one to be reckoned with, but it had also made it a target"



Under the leadership of Genghis Khan, the Mongol Empire dominated the Silk Road for generations. When it fell, factions took over stretches of the road

Image source: Wiki

had been preferential to Christian traders, were set aside under the regime. Now Christians were hit with the highest import fees of all, as a little reminder that it had been a bad decision to bet against the Ottoman Empire. Once the port had bristled with Italian trading vessels and the wealth they brought in, but as fees and overheads soared, the traffic began to decline.

It was the beginning of the end for the Silk Road and even where the road left the city by land, not sea, things were no easier. Stretching for 7,000 sometimes perilous miles, the Silk Road crossed many territories, encountering innumerable religious beliefs and political allegiances. The safety of the Silk Road and access to it for travellers and merchants was subject to the wills of those who controlled the land through which it ran and sometimes, unsurprisingly, there were tensions. Islam was the predominant faith along the Silk Road, and though Sunni and Shiite Muslims interacted harmoniously and grew their communities together, when factions did disagree, it made the Silk Road a perilous place. The difference of a few miles could pitch travellers from one group's territory into another, constantly at risk from factional leaders looking to increase their own power and influence.

> *"The fate of the Silk Road was put in jeopardy by the decline and eventual fall of the Mongol Empire"*

Quite apart from religion, however, the fate of the Silk Road was put in jeopardy by the decline and eventual fall of the Mongol Empire, whose fortunes had been steadily declining as those of the Ottomans grew. Thanks to the efforts of Genghis Khan, the Mongols once dominated a vast part of the Silk Road, having first seized the northern road before heading south. The vast Mongol Empire stretched from China to Europe, and the Silk Roads were vital to the empire's communication and trading routes. Under the Pax Mongolica, or Mongolian Peace, the routes were protected from bandits, and local factions and travellers such as Marco Polo took advantage of this period to travel freely.

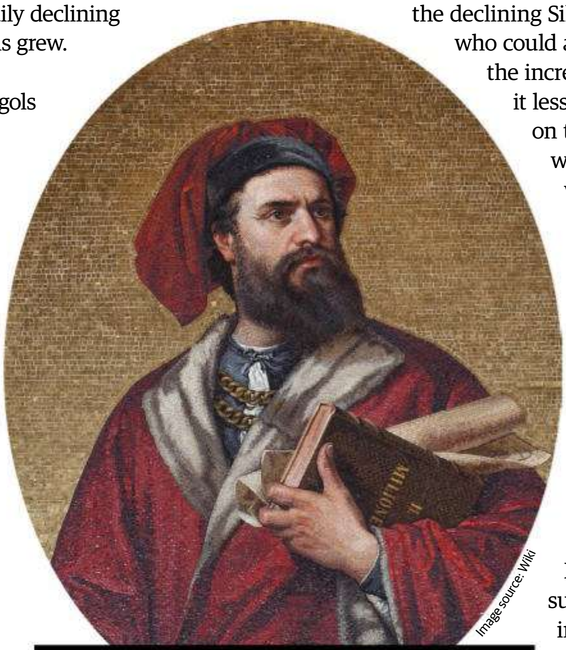


Image source: Wiki

During the Age of Discovery, explorers such as Marco Polo used the Silk Road to travel freely through previously unreachable territories

By the time the Byzantine powers were in their death throes, and a century before Constantinople fell, the once mighty Mongol Empire was on its knees, devastated by disease and continued attacks on its power bases. As the empire fragmented, the once safe passage of the Silk Road fell into other hands, with factional warlords assuming control of stretches. Merchants and other travellers were no longer confident of their safety should they travel the Silk Road and there was less merchandise to sell even if they did take the risks, as production of once-exclusive items such as silk was now possible in other lands too, meaning that the demand for Chinese produce lessened significantly. In fact, where travellers had once left China with their bolts of sought-after silks and dominated the distribution of it, by the 14th century, European trading vessels laden with foreign silks were a familiar sight in Chinese ports. Ocean travel was both quicker and more efficient than overland and silk was no longer exclusively produced in China.

In response to these encroaching vessels, China introduced an isolationist policy known as the Haijin, which forbade foreign ships from entering Chinese waters. Land routes began to be far more regulated too, and as isolationism took hold, China closed itself down. Once the Ottoman Empire seized Constantinople, China was effectively cut off from the West, accessible by land only via the declining Silk Road. Even for those who could access the Silk Road, the increasing dangers made it less attractive. With travel on the Silk Road bringing with it danger from warring factions and religions, those who depended on trade for their income or sought to explore new lands were now forced to look elsewhere.

Travellers began to seek new routes to the East that would avoid the hazardous Silk Road, and they were sure that the secret lay in the oceans. They turned to Ptolemy's *Geographical Survey*, which was written in

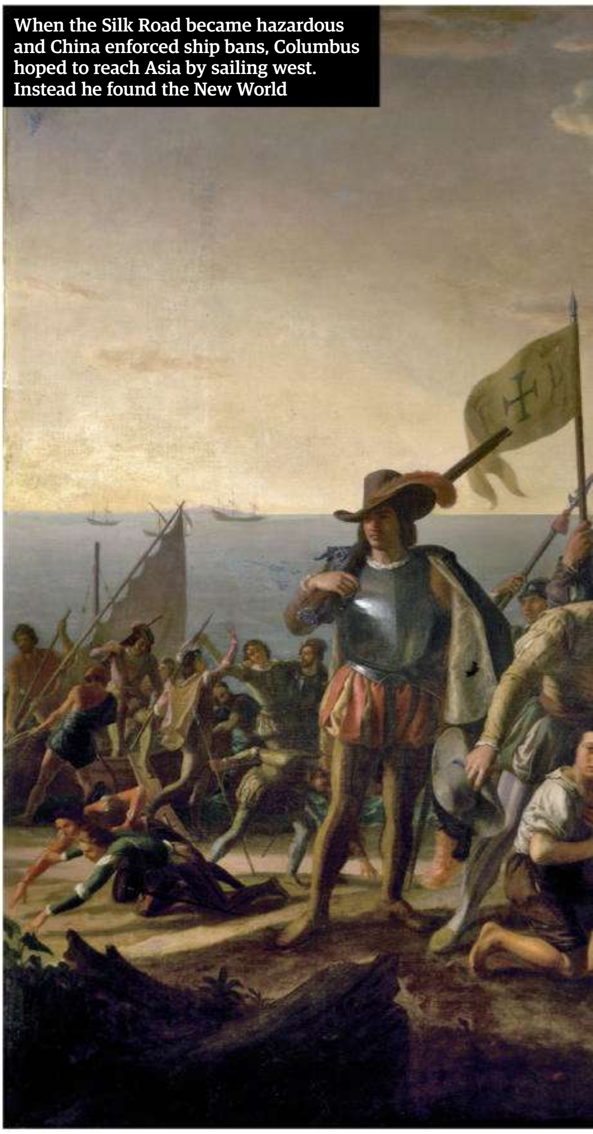

When the Silk Road became hazardous and China enforced ship bans, Columbus hoped to reach Asia by sailing west. Instead he found the New World

Image source: Wiki

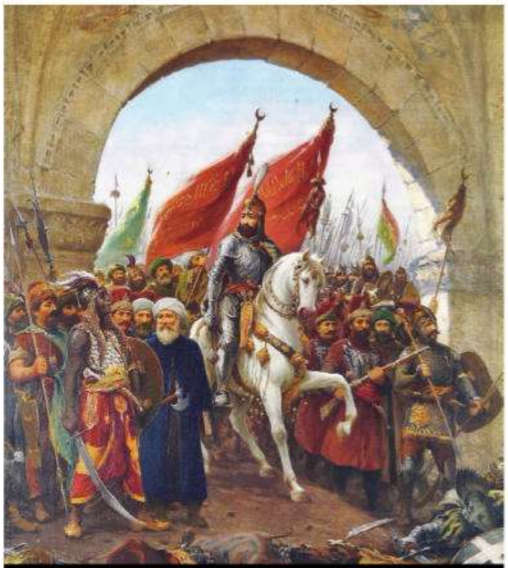
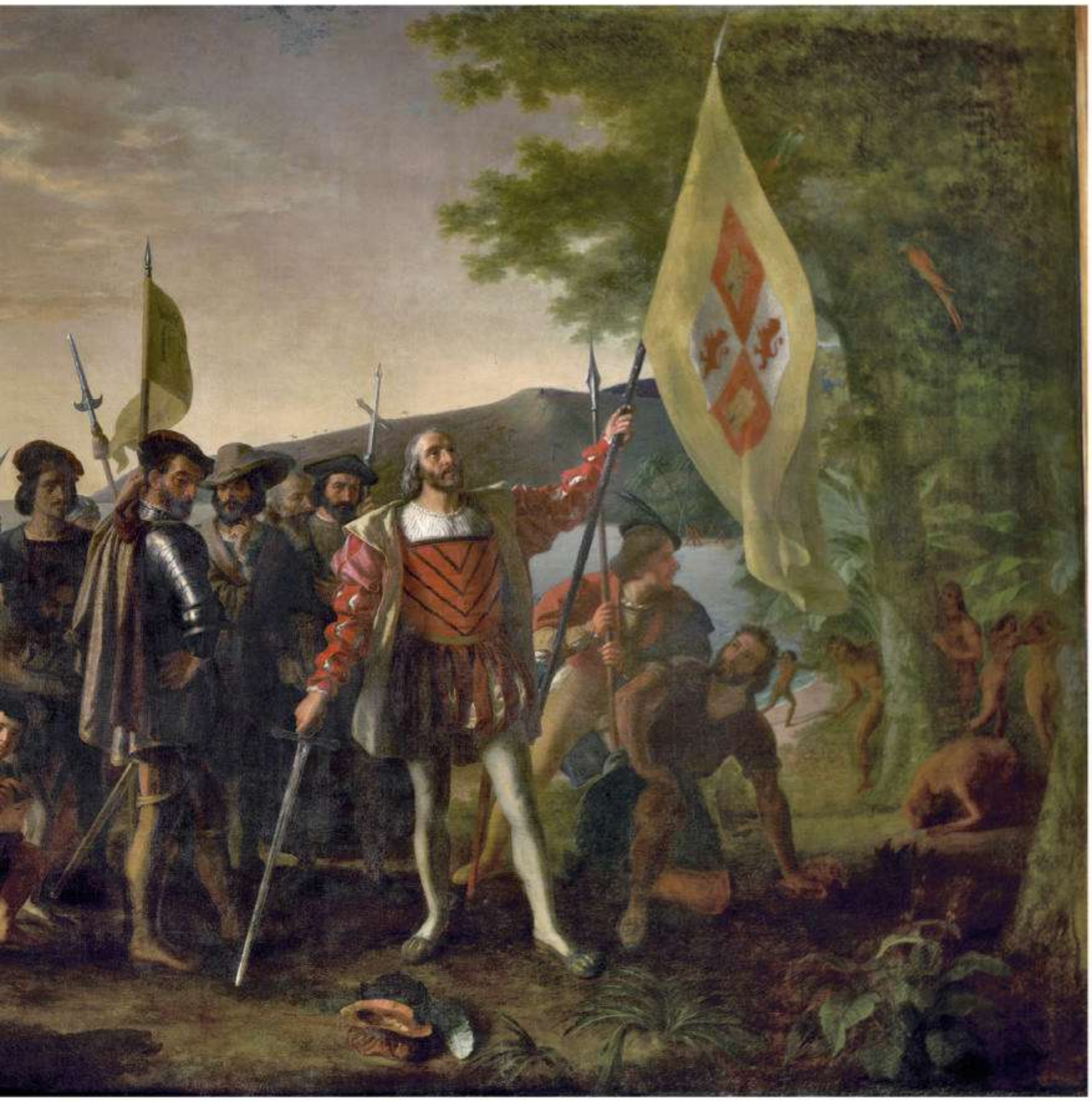

By the time Constantinople fell to the Ottoman soldiers, Byzantium's power had dwindled to virtually nothing. It was a vital conquest for the Muslim Ottomans

Image source: Wiki



the 2nd century and claimed that there was no landmass between the westernmost European shores and the distant coasts of East Asia. Should a vessel set off from the former and sail around the circumference of the globe, it would eventually reach the latter. However, ship technology in the 2nd century had not been up to the job, but centuries later, much more advanced shipbuilding technology lay within the grasp of explorers.

Christopher Columbus calculated that he would be able to make the voyage from Europe to the East Asian coast and, with funding from the Spanish royal court, he set sail for China. In fact, what Columbus found was the New World, ripe both for import and export. Less than a decade later, Portuguese explorers arrived in India and swiftly set about establishing trading agreements that would allow the movement of goods from India and Asia into Europe and beyond.

For centuries, the Silk Road lay in tatters, the once wealthy trading cities and towns that had flourished along its routes falling into ruin. For centuries the Silk Road fell silent, a relic of a bygone age, but all of that changed in the 21st century, as the East once more looked to renew its links with the West. This modern Silk Road, a railway that passes through China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia, was completed in 1990 and has since been extended into a network that allows freight to travel from China all the way to Germany, encountering none of the hazards once common whilst still being far more efficient than a maritime alternative. The network has since widened to ensure that Chinese goods can travel as far as Spain, Italy and the UK.

In late 2013 during a visit to Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled plans for the Belt and Road Initiative as well as a Maritime Silk Road, which will establish transport hubs with a global reach, and embryonic plans for an Ice Silk Road, heading into the frozen north. Along the way, cities are beginning to see changes just as they did on the old Silk Road, from investment to immigration and industrialisation. Once said to be a thing of the past, the Silk Road is being reborn.

## Critics of the new Silk Road

### The modern world's response to news of the new Silk Roads

The new Silk Roads have attracted their share of criticism from across the world. Some critics have accused China of debt trap diplomacy to fund the project, extending credit to other countries in order to fund their part of the initiative, knowing that those countries will never be able to repay and giving the Chinese government leverage over them when they default.

Other critics have raised concerns that by strengthening and developing the transport infrastructure between China and its neighbours, China will be able to strategically influence regulatory obstacles that might otherwise have limited its growth. They argue that it will allow China to expand at the expense of the US, as the two nations battle for dominance in the region. There are concerns over the environmental impact of all these projects too,  as well as the vast power stations that are being constructed to enable and power the new Silk Roads.

Though Russia has championed the new initiatives, the wider international community has had been more cautious, urging the Chinese to increase the transparency and accountability of the Belt and Road Initiative. China has been reluctant to do so, reiterating only that the project will bring benefits to the whole world, not just to China itself.

Xi Jinping, the president of the People's Republic of China, has championed the Belt and Road initiative that will create a new Silk Road

Image source: Wiki

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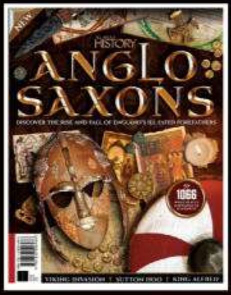
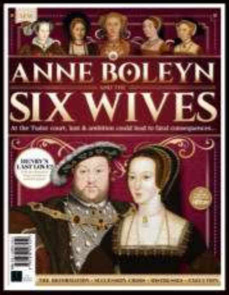
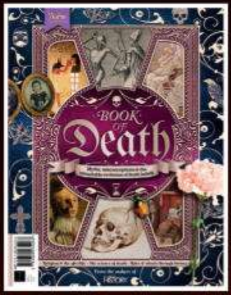


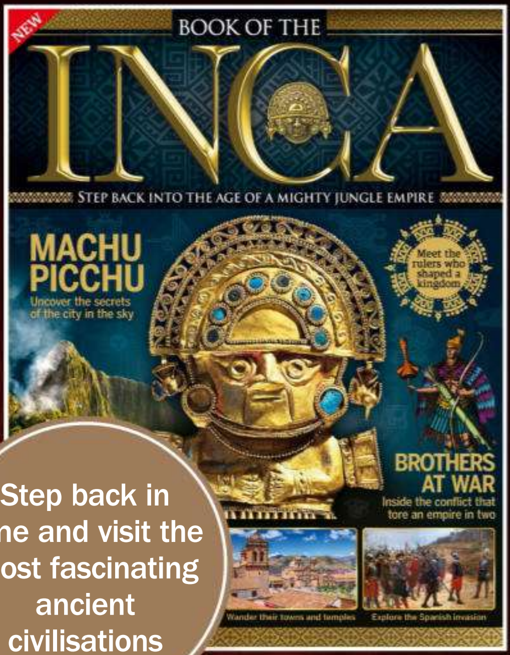
ANGLO SAXONS



ANNE BOLEYN AND THE SIX WIVES



Book of Death



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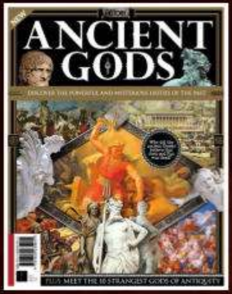

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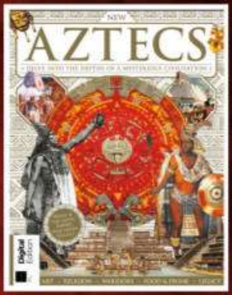

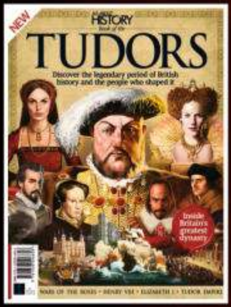

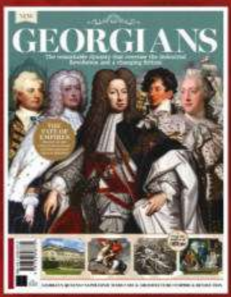

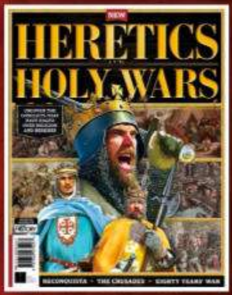

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A TIMELINE OF TRADE

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Discover lost cities and vanished realms that were once key points on the Silk Road

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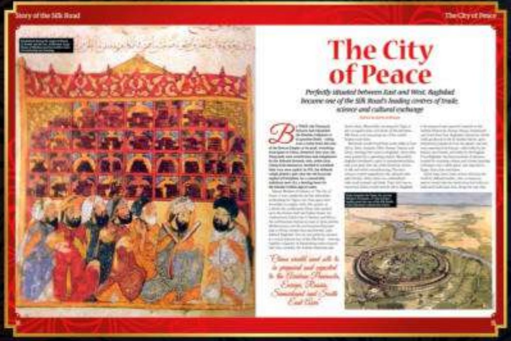
Learn how knowledge and ideas from the Silk Road changed fashion, religion and more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